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subwoofer



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cinema with style and substance

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→ READER'S CINEMA → 47 RONIN'S SFX SECRETS → BLUETOOTH SPEAKERS

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Q300 5.1 System, What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision, August 2011

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High-end cinema room, p32

WELCOME

Do you rip CDs to your computer so you can listen to music on an MP3 player or a network streamer? Of course you do – you've been doing it for years. You've been breaking the law obviously, but from June you'll be able to do it legally, as the government tweaks UK copyright rules to allow for 'format shifting' and making personal copies.



So our laws are finally catching up with the real world, but not when it comes to movies. While the official advisory notice from the Intellectual Property Office also says the new law applies to DVDs (and, one would assume, Blu-rays), it then says that these may feature anti-copying tech that itself is protected by law, and invites you to complain to the Secretary of State(!) if you think it's too restrictive. The situation is therefore as clear as mud – it will seemingly be legal to have a backup copy of a movie, but illegal to make one. My plans for a 12TB media tank are again on hold and I'll continue with physical discs.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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Adrian Justins:
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NIGHT & DAY

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BULLETIN

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SKY Satcaster reveals its new disc and download strategy **FOCAL** Premium Dimension soundbar unveiled
BBFC How changes to Video Recordings Act could impact independent UK labels **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-size chunks **ROBOCOP** Sci-fi remake sets sights on DVD and BD **AND MUCH MORE!**

Mid-range masters

Yamaha RX-Vx77 AV receivers → <http://uk.yamaha.com>



Yamaha is looking to strengthen its grip on the mid-range AV receiver market with four new additions to its RX-Vx77 line-up. Pictured alongside the budget RX-V377 (far right) above are the £360 RX-V477, £500 RX-V577, £560 RX-V677 and £650 RX-V777, the first two of which are on sale now, with the latter pair following in the Summer. HDMI 2.0 will be featured across the range and the RX-V677 and V777 support 4K video at 60fps. The two more expensive models also mark the first time that Yamaha has offered integrated Wi-Fi as standard on its AVRs.

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag



Slimmer sound

Denon DHT-S514 Soundbar → www.denon.co.uk

Denon is taking aim at that prime audio real estate below your TV once again with a new soundbar. Priced around £400, the DHT-S514 promises a mix of low-profile design (something that definitely couldn't be said of the brand's chunkier DHT-FS3 X-Space Surround System) and hi-fidelity audio performance.

To this end, Denon's rather stylish new 'bar utilises two 0.5in tweeters in conjunction with two oval 2in x 5in mid-range woofers, while the accompanying wireless sub boasts a pair of 5.25in bass drivers. Other features include HDMI with ARC, aptX Bluetooth streaming and Denon Virtual Surround processing.

While it looks cool in photos, glowing blue drivers might have been a bit distracting in the real world...



Denon boasts of 'deep bass attacks' courtesy of the 100W wireless subwoofer's dual woofers



To the Moon and back



The tech boffins at KEF have been hard at work cooking up a series of enhancements for the brand's ultra-high-end 2m-tall Muon

loudspeakers. Priced around £135,000 per pair, the upgraded Muons utilise the latest iteration of KEF's Uni-Q point source driver array (now rear-vented to reduce pressure waves) and employ a completely redesigned crossover. And if you already own a pair of the speakers, KEF will fly a senior engineer out to your home to undertake the update on site!

www.kef.com

Budget projector



Those in the market for a mid-priced 3D projector will want to take a shufti at

the latest, most affordable addition to Sony's lineup. Priced around £1,900, the Full HD VPL-HW40ES uses the same SXRD panel tech that appears in its pricier siblings, as well as the Reality Creation image processing originally created for the brand's 4K models. Other features include 1,700 Lumens brightness, Bright Cinema and Bright TV modes and 'extra-wide' lens shift range to improve setup flexibility. Get it in black or white.

www.sony.co.uk

Onkyo embraces 4K



Onkyo has added two new models to its 2014 range. Available to buy

now, the 5.2-channel TX-NR525 (£400) and TX-NR626 (£500, pictured) both support HDMI-specified 4K/60p video passthrough, with the TX-NR626 also billed as the world's first AVR to support HDCP 2.2 DRM copy protection. The two new AVRs also major in high-resolution audio playback, promising compatibility with all of the major 'gapless' formats including 5.6MHz DSD, 192kHz/24bit FLAC and ALAC up to 96kHz/24bit.

www.uk.onkyo.com

Disc and download strategy

Sky takes a new approach to 'download to own' with Buy & Keep

Pay to own a movie download from Sky and the satellite giant will also send you a copy of the movie on DVD within a week. This surprising deal comes as Sky expands its Sky Store service to allow its customers to buy as well as rent the latest movie releases.

The Buy & Keep service is open to all Sky customers with a Sky+ box. New releases will be priced at around £13.99, with titles available between three and four months after cinematic release, some four or so months prior to appearing on Sky Movies.

Customers can delete watched recordings and re-download them at any time. The DVD, which is packaged exactly the same as you would get elsewhere, at the very least provides customers with access to the extras, which aren't available online, as well as giving them a physical copy of the movie.

Because downloads are still such a small part of the ownership market, Sky wants to get in on the disc-buying habits of its movie-loving customers. Sky Store's Director Nicola Bamford told *HCC*: 'There's a 94 per cent split between movie ownership on disc and just six per cent digital (download).' Sky has 11 million customers in the UK and 50 per cent of all DVD and Blu-rays sold in Blighty are to Sky customers.

Majority rules

But why not offer a Blu-ray option? 'Because Blu-ray player ownership is



Nicola Bamford: 'We're responding to the fact that a large number of Sky customers told us they like owning the DVD'

too small,' explains Bamford (in fact 19 per cent of UK homes have one, compared with 73 per cent having a DVD deck), adding:

'launching with one product we have to appeal to the majority.'

Bamford admits it's possible that at some stage the satcaster will offer Blu-ray but also says that the provision of a separate copy of each title bought on DVD could just as easily cease: 'The market could shift quickly, movie rentals are split 50/50 between streaming and discs, and if ownership follows in the same way we might change the proposition. But at present we're responding to the fact that a large number of our customers told us they like owning the disc'.

Although Sky isn't saying it, the current DVD proposition provides a form of ownership that will outlive a Sky subscription, as without the disc, customers who cease paying the monthly Sky+ £10 fee will be unable to view their purchases. Bamford also tantalised *HCC* readers with the prospect of 4K movie downloads, but not until 'the time when there is the content and the demand.'



PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Thor: The Dark World (All-region BD)

From its bass-rich lossless soundtrack to its awe-inspiring Full HD visuals, Marvel's superhero sequel is a powerhouse of AV prowess on Blu-ray.



Gravity 3D (All-region BD)



Not just the very best stereoscopic home cinema experience money can buy, but a cracking piece of popcorn cinema as well!

Orca the Killer Whale (R2 DVD)



A real guilty pleasure, this ridiculous *Jaws* rip-off has finally been given a long overdue re-release on DVD on these shores.

The LEGO Movie Game (Xbox 360/PS3/etc.)



How better to pass the time while we endure the wait for *The LEGO Movie* to arrive on 3D Blu-ray?

The Corpse Grinders (R0 DVD)



Cat food made from human flesh turns cuddly kitties into crazed killers. Trashy 1971 classic.

Download a film from Sky and get a DVD

EXTRAS...

Small items that make a big impression

The Secret Service: Kingsman



This volume collects the first six issues of Mark Millar's high-concept spy comic, which hits the big screen in

October courtesy of director/co-plotter Matthew Vaughn.

The Children's Book of Cinema



Spark your little one's interest in filmmaking at an early age with this illustrated guide and maybe you'll be

watching their film on your home cinema one day...

Game of Thrones: Mystery Minis



Funko's latest line of collectible 2.5in *Game of Thrones* figures come in 'blind boxes' so you never know

who you're going to get! There are 15 Mystery Minis to collect and swap with friends, priced around £6 each.

Warnog Klingon Beer



Canadian company The Federation of Beer commissioned this licensed *Star Trek* beer with 'notes of clove, banana and caramel.'

A new Dimension in sound

Focal takes the wraps off its uniquely versatile premium soundbar

Focal-JM Lab has become the latest loudspeaker manufacturer to throw its beret in to the soundbar ring having unveiled its premium-priced Dimension at a swanky Parisian art gallery.

Gérard Chrétien, Managing Director of Focal, revealed that with the soundbar market growing by 113 per cent last year the company 'could not remain a spectator'. Admitting that 'Bose gave the premium soundbar market great credibility with its Cinemate 1 SR', Chrétien believes that Focal can win a healthy slice of the action with a product that (he claims) outdoes both Bose's 'bar and Bowers & Wilkins' Panorama 2 in terms of specs and price.

The Focal Dimension is made from aluminium and has five full-range drivers plus bass reflex vents. It also ticks the most important boxes on any prospective owner's list of requirements, including HDMI inputs, high power (6 x 75W), multichannel soundtrack compatibility, an optional subwoofer and adds a unique versatility in terms of its spatial design.

Intended for use with screens 50in and over, the Dimension can be used simply as a soundbar (priced at £890, including a Bluetooth dongle), mounted on a wall or on a rack. It can be also be used with a wired sub, whereupon it costs £1,200 and takes on the shape of a soundbase, or with a separate, wirelessly connected sub, the £600 Sub Air.

Driving success

The Dimension represents Focal's biggest ever launch in terms of technology and



Gérard Chrétien: 'The continued growth of the soundbar market ensured that Focal could not remain a spectator'

investment, with a newly designed ultra-flat driver the key factor. This, Chrétien says, is 'like the lens of a camera. The number of pixels makes no difference if the lens is inferior.'

The driver does not use treble directivity to create surround sound, which Chrétien considers unsatisfying. Instead it uses phase and delay to deliver the SL and SR channels: 'The centre channel is usually moved back to emphasise the surround effects but here it remains in total coherence to provide intelligible dialogue.'

Calibration is limited to three settings each for distance, position and room type. Low frequencies are mixed in mono and reproduced by the four lateral channels into the bass vents. Throw in the soundbase sub and an 80Hz filter comes in to play, with the sound base delivering a

frequency response of 36Hz against 50Hz for the 'bar.

But, despite HDMI inputs, the Dimension can't decode DTS-HD MA or Dolby TrueHD bitstreams. However, we were given a short demo of *Life of Pi* on Blu-ray and even in the less than ideal conditions of the art gallery the sound was remarkable for the spatial effect caused when the shoals of fish fly over the boat. *HCC* will get stuck in to an in-depth review very soon.



Take your pick: soundbase or soundbar?

Bringing Ultra HD to Full HD TV

Sharp unleashes 'near-4K' Quattron Pro panel technology in the UK

Sharp is promising buyers a 'next-generation Full HD viewing experience' with its UQ10 Quattron Pro LED TV range, which has just hit the UK.

The Quattron Pro panel has 2.5 times as many sub-pixels as a traditional Full HD screen and claims to offer over a billion shades of colour. According to the Japanese brand, this means that they are the only Full HD TVs that are capable of displaying native Ultra HD content (in 'near-4K' quality) via HDMI. 'For people who aren't ready to invest in Ultra HD,

but don't want to be left behind, it's the best of both worlds,' states Alberico Lissoni, President, Consumer Electronics, Sharp Europe.

That's not to say that traditional HD content is being ignored, as the THX Display-certified LED TVs also utilise bespoke upscaler tech to improve the image quality of all video sources.

The UQ10 lineup consists of the 60in LC60UQ10KN (£2,100), the 70in LC70UQ10KN (£3,200) and the 80in LC80UQ10KN (£6,300).



Better than Full HD, but not quite 4K

"BARNSTORMER"

SVS SB-2000 Active Sub



“ installation is simple...authentic weight and punch...rich and inviting...omnipotent low-end thud...seriously impressive... cinematic scale and presence...for the asking price, SVS's SB-2000 provides hair-raising levels of low-frequency fun. ”

Mark Craven, Home Cinema Choice, April 2014

Bass selector

Eclipse TD725SWMK2 & TD520SW → www.eclipse-td.net

Eclipse has unleashed two new 'high-speed' subwoofers designed to partner its single-driver Eclipse Time Domain speakers. Claiming to make conventional designs sound like 'sloths' by comparison, the 500W TD725SWMK2 (£5,100) and 250W TD520SW (£3,000) utilise Eclipse's Square Egg twin driver array for improved bass speed and power, and include an additional set of switchable inputs that allows them to be simultaneously connected, and optimised for both stereo and multichannel configurations.



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Quality



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Continuous Casting cable

Cable for mobile devices

Wooden storage box

Selvedge denim carry
case



High Sensitivity &
Scalability

Plush Padding &
Reduced Weight for
Exceptional Comfort



oppo-bluray.co.uk

DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ MAY

05: Get Carter

Mike Hodges' acclaimed 1971 crime film makes its bow on Blu-ray at long last. There's still no word on a hi-def release for the awful Sylvester Stallone remake, though...
www.warnerbros.co.uk

09: The Wind Rises



The latest (and quite possibly last) film by Japanese animation legend Hayao Miyazaki flies into cinemas across the UK after breaking box office records at home.
www.studiocanal.co.uk

14: Festival de Cannes

The movie industry will once again be decamping *en masse* to the French Riviera for the start of the world's biggest film festival. And at the end of the nine days, we'll have a new winner of The Palme d'Or.
www.festival-cannes.com

15: High End Show 2014

Munich's MOC exhibition centre plays host to this annual four-day show organised by Germany's High End Society to celebrate the best audio kit that money can buy.
www.highendsociety.de

16: Godzilla



Hollywood's second attempt at a US remake of *Godzilla* arrives 16 years after the first. Find out if director Gareth Edwards' film actually lives up to the hype when the massive monster hits a multiplex near you.
www.warnerbros.co.uk

19: The Wolf of Wall Street

Martin Scorsese's controversial (and extremely funny) biography of New York stockbroker Jordan Belfort arrives on Blu-ray and DVD.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

25: X-Men: Days of Future Past

Bryan Singer is back behind the camera for this stereoscopic comic book epic that promises to unite the divergent timelines of the original *X-Men* trilogy and 2011's *X-Men: First Class*. Catch it in cinemas.
www.fox.co.uk

29: HCC #235

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

Indie UK labels under threat

New government legislation could put an end to feature-packed discs

In recent years the UK DVD and Blu-ray industry has gone from strength-to-strength, with independent distributors thrilling film fans with discs chocked full of exhaustive supplementary material. However, new government legislation aimed at protecting young children from overtly sexualised material in music videos may be about to put an end to that.

Devised by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the new regulations aim to tighten up the classification requirements for 'music, sport, religious and educational videos,' with specific regard to what material now qualifies as being Exempt from certification. While it's easy to see what the DCMS hoped to achieve with its new classification regulations, the approach it has adopted will have a serious knock-on effect for smaller film distributors.

The key problem is that film distributors have to pay for every piece of video that the BBFC examines – including extra features. Until now distributors had been able to save money by not submitting documentary material (which would be officially Exempt from classification due to its educational nature), unless it dealt with anything particularly contentious. When the films they accompany are already rated 18, this made a lot of sense as the extras wouldn't be available to people under that age anyway.

However, under the amendments to the Video Recordings Act all documentary material that would be rated higher than a U certificate will have to be submitted to the BBFC for classification (ignoring the fact that film clips will come from the movies that have already have been certified), costing



Francesco Simeoni: 'These new guidelines are just penalising companies that still have a vested interest in physical media'

distributors considerably more money. While these additional costs are the sort of things that major Hollywood studios will

find easy to absorb, the implications for independents operating on much tighter budgets could be catastrophic.

'Whether we choose to include content for our releases has a new set of financial considerations, which means we are at a significant disadvantage to our competitors. Yet all of this content could go on YouTube with no classification and that would be okay,' states Francesco Simeoni, Director of Catalogue at Arrow Films. 'Our audience is very much on an international level and so we must compete with territories that do not have to contend with such costs.'

Independent spirit

Despite not having been consulted on the revised legislation, the good news is that UK independent labels are not taking this change of law lying down. As one of the first people to alert others to the possible consequences of the new regulations, Marc Morris, co-founder of Nucleus Films, arranged a meeting of smaller labels (including Artificial Eye, 88 Films, 101 Films, Dogwoof, Arrow, Soda, High Fliers, Second Sight, Argent and Shameless) in London to discuss the situation. As a result of this, Morris has now been asked to meet with the BBFC to discuss the labels' concerns. Let's hope they are heard and acted upon.



Sony unleashes AVRs



Sony has added two new multichannel AV

receivers to its lineup of high-resolution audio kit. Arriving this month, the STR-DN1050 and STR-DN850 (pictured) support DSD and 192KHz/24-bit WAV and FLAC files, either streamed over your home network (thanks to built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi) or via a USB drive. The more alluring STR-DN1050 offers a 'best-in-class' construction with a rigid chassis and glass epoxy resin circuit board, 165W x 7.2-channel amplification, 4K passthrough and custom components.
www.sony.co.uk

airDAC adds UPnP



Touted as 'the only audiophile Airplay component on the market', Arcam's airDAC is relaunching with a

UPnP (Universal Plug and Play) upgrade to deliver increased cross-platform functionality – the £400 desktop gizmo is now able to work its audio magic on files (including 96kHz/24-bit) streamed from UPnP-enabled computers and NAS drives, with a new SongBook app aiding control. SPDIF and optical inputs also allow hookup of Smart TVs and CD/DVD/BD players.
www.arcam.co.uk

Meridian celebrates



Back in 1989 Meridian unleashed the world's first digital loudspeaker. To mark the 25th anniversary of the event, the company has released a trio of Special Edition versions of its DSP

Digital Active Loudspeakers. The DSP5200 SE (£10,000), DSP7200 SE (£24,000) and DSP8000 SE (£43,000, pictured) all feature a new semi-horn-loaded tweeter with beryllium dome, new DSP tech and wide bandwidth analogue electronics. Upgrades are also available for existing owners.
www.meridian-audio.com

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Amazon opens Fire on Apple TV

Amazon is taking the fight to Apple TV and Google Chromecast with the launch of its Fire TV set-top box. Launched in the US at the start of April, priced \$99, the Fire TV box gives users access to Amazon's Prime Instant Video streaming service, plus a variety of other services including Netflix, Hulu Plus and Flixster. The set-top box also provides access to music streaming and games, with the dedicated Amazon Fire Game Controller costing an additional \$40.

2 DVD copying made legal

Making backup copies of CDs, DVDs and Blu-rays for personal use will be legal in the UK from June 1 as the government attempts to make UK copyright law more relevant to a digital age. Under the new law it will be perfectly legal for you to 'copy any album, film or book you have already purchased for one device onto another without infringing copyright.' Although it's still naughty to break DRM. Confusing, huh?

3 YouView funding secured

The future of the YouView internet-based TV service has been secured for the immediate future following the announcement that all seven shareholders (including the BBC, ITV and Channel 4) have signed a new five-year agreement.

4 Sony tackles 4K World Cup

Sony has confirmed that it plans to shoot three matches, including the final, at this Summer's FIFA World Cup in Ultra HD. The footage is being shot for use in the official 2014 FIFA World Cup Film in 4K – however, based on what HCC was told during a 4K live broadcast of *War Horse* last month, we also believe that Sony is investigating the possibility of offering live 4K cinema screenings of the games in question.

5 Broadband complaints

BT has been named and shamed by Ofcom as the most complained-about broadband internet and pay TV service provider during the fourth quarter of 2013. Virgin Media and Sky were the least moaned-about broadband providers.

6 3D Experience closed

Sony has pulled the plug on the 3D Experience channel that had previously been accessible via the brand's 3D-compatible Smart TVs. While some may see this as further proof that the 3D fad is over, Sony sees things differently, claiming that the channel was only ever meant to give users a taste of 3D when there wasn't much stereoscopic content available elsewhere.

7 Facebook's virtual insanity

Are you ready for the second coming of virtual reality? Well, Facebook clearly thinks you are, having just spent a staggering \$2bn acquiring Oculus and its Oculus Rift VR technology. The buyout includes \$400m cash and \$1.6bn in Facebook stock, with an additional \$300m put aside for performance incentives. 'Oculus has the chance to create the most social platform ever, and change the way we work, play and communicate,' gushed Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg.

8 Celebrating tech design

LG Electronics had a successful night at the Red Dot Awards 2014, picking up 33 of the design gongs. Among the devices honoured on the night were the BH9540TW Smart 3D Blu-ray Home Cinema System and the G Flex smartphone, both of which picked up prestigious 'Best of the Best' awards.

9 Universal joins forces with The Royal British Legion

Universal Pictures is commemorating the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I by re-releasing eight of its most celebrated war movies on DVD (including *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*). Each disc will be available for £5, with 50p from each sale going to The Royal British Legion.

10 Frozen sets new record

Disney's award-winning 'toon *Frozen* (reviewed last issue) has become the biggest animated hit in box office history. Worldwide takings for the film now exceed \$1.072bn, beating the previous record of \$1.063bn set in 2010 by *Toy Story 3*. The takings also make it the 10th highest grossing film in box office history.



\$1.072bn buys a lot of holidays in the sun...

PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Keep on smoking...

Tommy Chong has announced that he and Cheech Marin are currently working on a new *Cheech and Chong* movie in collaboration with *Super Troopers* director Jay Chandrasekhar.

Prometheus 2 on track?



Rumours are rife that *Prometheus 2* will start shooting later this year, based on a script by *Green Lantern* scribe Michael Green. There's no word yet on whether Ridley Scott will direct, but the film is expected to hit cinemas in March 2016.

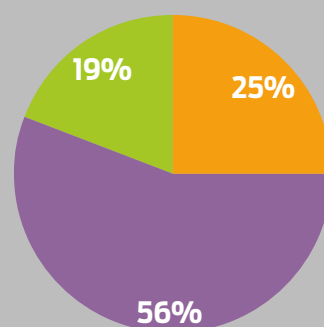
Ancient aspect ratio

Dinosaurs aren't the only extinct things that will be returning to the big screen in next year's *Jurassic World*. The director has revealed that the film will be screened in 2.0:1, calling it 'an aspect ratio that hasn't been seen theatrically in a very long time... It allows us enough height to fit humans and dinosaurs into a single frame without giving up that sense of scope'.

WE ASKED...

Is your primary home cinema screen...

- LED LCD
- Plasma
- Projector



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I fought the law...

RoboCop → StudioCanal → Region B BD/R2 DVD



Having exploded onto the world cinema scene with the controversial 2007 police thriller *Elite Squad*, Brazilian filmmaker José Padilha made the leap to big-budget Hollywood fare earlier this year with an action-packed remake of Paul Verhoeven's acclaimed sci-fi satire *RoboCop*. After cleaning up at the box office, Padilha's all-new *RoboCop* is gearing up to hit DVD and Blu-ray on June 9, accompanied by five deleted scenes, ten Omnicorp corporate videos and three behind-the-scenes featurettes. We'd buy that for a dollar!





THERE GOES THE NEIGHBOURHOOD!



It might be warming up outside but the chills keep coming thick and fast! From brooding gothic castles, murky Mississippi swamplands and – most horrific of all – small-town suburbia, we've got spooky settings to suit all tastes.

Tom Hanks suspects his new neighbours are cannibalistic ghouls in *The 'Burbs* and genre legend Vincent Price has a ball offing the snooty theatre critics of London in various gruesome ways in *Theatre of Blood*. Price continues his murderous exploits in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* and *Dr. Phibes Rises Again!*, whilst *The Beast Within* sees a were-Cicada (yes, you read that right!) munching its way through the inhabitants of a small town with a dark past.

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Panasonic 2014: Life beyond plasma

No curves, no OLED and no plasma – **Mark Craven** reports on Panasonic's European Convention in Amsterdam where LED displays ruled the roost

PANASONIC IN 2014 is a company with new ambitions. Where once the Japanese consumer electronics giant could rely on its well-regarded plasma business to ensure it stuck out from the crowd, the removal of PDPs from its product stable means it's now solely battling its TV rivals in the LED arena – an arena where the likes of Sony, Samsung and LG are fighting fit.

Perhaps with that in mind, the brand is making quite a statement with its first post-plasma flatscreen lineup, ushering in an extensive LED range targeting multiple price points, screen sizes and feature sets. 4K is on the agenda, backed up by certification from THX and state-of-the-art HDMI 2.0/DisplayPort connectivity, while a new generation of Smart interactivity aims to lure

net-savvy buyers. *HCC* attended its annual European Convention to discover more.

Making Smart smarter

'Beyond Smart' is one philosophy behind Panasonic's new screen lineup, reflecting what the company believes is the shifting nature of how we interact with our goggleboxes. Says Shiro Nishiguchi, Panasonic Senior Vice President: 'The Smart TV model is becoming obsolete. Although our lives have changed, TVs have not. Terrestrial is the prime/default source, but all content should be treated equally.'

How Panasonic plans to achieve this egalitarian ideal is via its new My Stream feature, one of a trio of technologies being bolted on to the well-received My Home Screen user interface first launched in 2013. A content aggregation/user recommendation system that turns the TV screen into a sliding wall of suggested material, My Stream draws from linear and online platforms, and even home media. Enter a search term and My Stream will show you what it's got, and it can be tailored to suit preferences (for

multiple user profiles) by the addition of a Favourites button on the touchpad remote. It's certainly an eye-opening way to browse content, with relatively quick transitions from selecting content and it appearing fullscreen.

A slightly less in-your-face Smart feature is the Info Bar. This, says Panasonic, turns your TV into a digital pinboard – 'no more fridge magnets' is the rather cute description – displaying the time/date, local weather report, a small selection of highlights from the My Stream feature and video or text messages that someone may have sent to your TV. Crucially it works when the TV is in standby mode – walk near the screen and the Info Bar appears along the bottom of the otherwise dormant display, woken by motion detection. A neat idea, but note that it's a locked-down system – you can't customise the bar with your favourite apps, for instance.

A third new Smart feature is TV Anywhere (not to be confused with Virgin Media's mobile on-demand service of the same name...). With a tablet or smartphone with Panasonic's TV Remote 2 app installed, and a local broadband connection, you can hook into your home TV and stream live (and USB-recorded) content to your device. Similar functionality was offered on last year's sets, but limited to your home network – this sees Panasonic busting out of your four walls, à la Slingbox. The feature will naturally be of most use in conjunction with TVs with twin tuners (e.g. 2 x Freeview HD), so that those outside the home aren't limited to what's being watched in the living room.

4K leads the charge

For picture junkies more interested in pixels than placeshifting, the top end of Panasonic's TV lineup is where they will inevitably turn. It's here that the company is offering a duo of 4K models, and a super-charged Full HD set. And it's here where it hopes to win over former plasma fans. 'Our plasma engineers haven't left,' Markus Wagenseil, marketing manager at Panasonic Europe, told HCC. 'They are now bringing their expertise to the LED team.'

Of the new high-end screens, the 4K AX802 (in 50in, 58in and 65in flavours) and Full HD AS802 (47in, 55in and 60in) will have launched by the time you read this. The flagship 4K AX900 isn't due to surface until Autumn and will feature what Panasonic is describing as 'several as yet undisclosed picture quality advances.' Despite that, it didn't stop

'Panasonic is making quite a statement with its new non-PDP lineup, ushering in an extensive LED range'

them touting a pre-production model – in a darkened room at the convention hall, Panasonic demo'd the AX900 next to a ZT65 PDP and last year's WT600 4K LED. Attendees were invited to guess which was which, with the idea being that the new AX900 mirrors plasma's ability to disgorge deep, true blacks. To a point, this game of pin the screen technology on the TV donkey worked, with the AX900 comparing favourably with its plasma stablemate and offering obvious improvement in black levels over its predecessor. Yet the plasma was easy to spot straight from the off, firstly because I'm susceptible to minor rainbow effect with PDPs, and secondly because the prototype AX900 still exhibited slight traces of backlight illumination (predominantly when viewed off-axis) in the torturous full black-out conditions.

The AS802 models offer the pinnacle in 1080p picture quality, according to Wagenseil. They utilise an IPS LED-lit panel with local dimming and sport Panasonic's Studio Master Drive technology, a twin-pronged tool that works to enhance picture quality (colour and detail) in scenes of low brightness. Processing power comes courtesy of the brand's Hexa Processing Engine.

Step up to the AX802 and THX 4K certification joins the party, as well as a 'pro' iteration of the local >

TIME FOR FREETIME

Rollback catchup service added to Panasonic TVs

As well engineering its own Smart TV upgrades for this year, Panasonic has tackled the essential catch-up TV market by integrating Freesat's Freetime service on all of its connected TVs except the entry-level AS500 range.



The move will ensure that the full suite of UK terrestrial catchup channels – BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5 – will be available from the end of May.

Freetime incorporates a rollback EPG (allowing simple access to catchup content), as well as an app interface and daily programme recommendations. A Freesat technology currently found on its satellite receivers boxes, it will work on both Freesat and Freeview-enabled Panasonic Smart TVs.



Left: Giving 4K a bit of glamour...

The Info Bar feature (below) enables users to see any messages (left) that have been sent to the screen





The DMP-BDT700 offers THX-certified 4K upscaling and a traditional, full-width design

dimming technology and, naturally, support for online 4K services. Drop down the range from the AS802, and it's the familiar story of incrementally less well-specified screens that will find homes with those with specific budget/feature demands. See below for more.

The design of the new high-end screens is delightfully discreet, with slim bezels and unobtrusive, 'open' desktop stands.

OLED? NOLED!

A few years ago 3D was the talk of the TV town. In 2014 it barely seems to merit a mention – Panasonic's representatives had to be nudged to reveal the company is employing passive panels on all its Full HD models, with active reserved for the 4K sets. But what of the more on-trend TV features hyped by competitors, such as curved displays and OLED? Here, Panasonic does talk – but in both cases it's to reveal its conservative side.

OLED isn't, for the moment, on its agenda. It has shown prototypes in the past, of course, including a 55in screen and a 20in tablet, but neither have hit the market.

'OLED is going to be a great tech,' states Wagenseil. Yet, he suggests, there are issues with

it that need addressing – presumably the same production issues that have put a dampener on Samsung's OLED ambitions. 'The time isn't right to commercialise OLED panels.' In the meantime, it's therefore only showcasing a video wall of curved 4K OLED panels, both concave and convex, that would be more at home in the digital signage

business than someone's living room.

So on to curves, then. With LG and Samsung bringing bent displays to the market and Sony dabbling, why isn't Panasonic following suit? The answer, suggests Wagenseil, is that it's not sure that consumers want them. 'What is the value?' he asks, before questioning whether the sweet viewing spot makes them family-friendly screens. 'We will carry on doing flat', he adds, 'but ask the consumer what they want...'

Bigging up Blu-ray

With the 4K display market taking hold and expected to grow rapidly it's only natural that home cinema fans turn their attention to ultra hi-def material. Yet unlike other brands offering HDD-based 4K film platforms, Panasonic shows no sign of wanting to become embroiled in content wrangling. Its 4K sets sport the necessary H.265 decoders for hi-res streaming from the likes of Netflix, and it's keen to stress that its Lumix line of digital cameras and camcorders are perfect partners for its flagship flatscreens, enabling home-brewed 4K movie-making and imaging. Beyond that, though, the

PICKING YOUR PANASONIC VIERA...

There's a multitude of LED flatscreens coming your way from the Japanese brand – here's what you need to know

AS400 series

The entry-level range for 2014. Available at 32in, 39in, 42in and 50in, these don't offer any Smart/networking talents – and HDMI connectivity is limited to just two inputs – but provide an affordable bigscreen option.

AS500 series

Smart features kick in here, with the familiar My Home Screen interface joined by built-in Wi-Fi for display mirroring, web browsing and app access. Sizes are again 32in, 39in, 42in and 50in.

AS600 series

These mid-range models are offered in the same sizes as the AS500, but introduce My Stream and Freetime functionality, employ Dual Core processing, and sport a slimmer design.

AS650 series

Screens with more enthusiast appeal, and at larger sizes – 42in, 47in, 55in and 60in. The AS650s add passive 3D, TV Anywhere functionality and a touchpad remote to the spec sheet, and picture quality tweaks including 1,200Hz Intelligent Frame Creation (IFC) and improved contrast.

AS740 series

Upper mid-range models that add Freesat HD support to the regular Freeview HD tuner, and employ an IPS panel (offering a wider claimed viewing angle than the AS650 range). USB recording and built-in cameras improve Smart functionality. Sizes are 42in, 47in and 55in.

AS802 series

Panasonic's premium 1080p sets, again in a trio of sizes (47in, 55in and 60in). Studio Master Drive and



local dimming technologies combine with Panasonic's Hexa Processing Engine and 1,800Hz IFC. Added user features are twin tuners and the new Info Bar.

AX802 series

Active 3D 4K panels with THX 4K Display certification and the full suite of Smart tools. Connectivity includes a quartet of HDMI inputs (4K 50/60p compatible) and a DisplayPort (4K 50/60p), plus SD Card, USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi. Support for the new HDCP 2.2 encryption is provided as a matter of future-proofing.



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company would seem to be waiting for the BDA to usher in a 4K Blu-ray standard.

Well, almost. This Summer will see the release of the DMP-BDT700, a new top-line disc-spinner to replace the long-running DMP-BDT500, with a penchant for 4K upscaling.

Daisuke Hagiwara is one of the engineers involved with the creation of the deck. 'This is our new flagship,' he explains, 'designed to be part of a 4K system'. Set to hit retailers with a £500 price tag, and therefore competing with players from the likes of Oppo and Marantz, format freaks may be disappointed to discover that it isn't a universal machine, turning a blind eye to DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD. On the other hand, it is the world's first deck to offer THX-certified 4K upscaling, plus all manner of performance and feature skills – including twin HDMI outputs (2.0), multichannel audio inputs, Pure Audio and low-jitter audio modes, 4K JPEG playback, Direct Chroma Upscaling and a 4K/60p output, enabling it to play out camcorder footage.

It has design appeal too – Panasonic has endowed the full-width DMP-BDT700 with a mature styling. Chunky feet support a solid-feeling chassis with a neat, brushed-grey fascia. It harks back to a day when BD spinners were truly coveted by AV fans.

Elsewhere in the disc-player lineup, smaller-chassis models proffer BD viewing to all but the Scroogiest of buyers, with the entry-level DMP-BD81 retailing for around £90.

Sound systems

On the A side of AV, Panasonic will continue to offer all-in-one home cinema packages, beside a suite of soundbars and soundbase speakers, and a new line in multiroom audio.

The former is undoubtedly a shrinking market, as modern buyers turn away multiple boxes and speaker wires in favour of more convenient solutions. However, the company is still putting engineering effort into improving its systems' performance – for this year at least. 'This is condensing all we know about home cinema into a

flagship product,' revealed a Panasonic spokesman about the forthcoming SC-BTT885. 'It will be our top model, for this year and going forward.' Armed with binding posts rather than the usual spring clip fare, and a second-generation LincsD amplifier unit, it uses a regular 5.1 array (but claims a 'virtual' speaker count of 36) with tallboy cabinets and a front-ported subwoofer packing a 20cm bass driver. Demonstrations of select scenes from *Jack The Giant Slayer* in a medium-sized room proved

'The company will continue to offer all-in-one systems, beside a suite of soundbars and soundbases'

impressive, with punchy dialogue delivery, a large soundstage and impactful high-frequency detailing.

Soundbars, and soundbases, however, are where the company is putting its focus, HCC was told. A quartet of the former are launching this year – the SC-HTB880, SC-HTB680, SC-HTB580 and the SC-HTB8. Only the B8 lacks HDMI hookup, with the flagship HTB880 featuring 4K passthrough to complement other user-friendly tricks including NFC, apt-X Bluetooth and a wireless subwoofer.

The SC-HTE180, meanwhile, is Panasonic's new soundbase – dubbed a 'speakerboard'. Offering a wider form factor than last year's SC-HTE80, it claims support for screens up to 50in. Twin integrated bass drivers aim to deliver bass weight without the need of an external subwoofer.

Looking forward

Business as usual for Panasonic then, albeit with a change in flatscreen strategy. The brand says it wants to 'set the scene' for the consumer AV industry, keeping its second-only-to-Samsung UK market share. Some cinephiles will lament the demise of its plasmas, but this will soon become nostalgia. Panasonic is looking forward ■

CREATING 4K CONTENT

Panasonic's digital imaging range evolves



Eager to give Ultra HD screen owners something to get excited about beyond upscaling and Netflix, Panasonic is promoting the idea of AV fans becoming 4K content creators.

Leading the charge is the HX-A500, dubbed the world's first 4K 25p wearable camcorder. This waterproof gizmo features two body parts – a lightweight camera section and a palm-sized body. Various mounting accessories should let users get the footage they want, and image stabilisation and levelling correction work to iron out any hiccups.



At the more serious end of the movie-making scale is the new Lumix

GH4. This high-end interchangeable lens camera offers a 4K recording mode, which Panasonic says is also ideal for creating 4K stills. Premium features include dual OLED display panels, a 16mega-pixel Live MOS sensor and Wi-Fi/NFC connectivity. With a 14-140mm lens it will set you back £1,750.



The SC-BTT505 – one of three new-look 'premium' all-in-one systems



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includes a host of bonus material, including the behind-the-scenes documentary *The Wolf Pack* and the *Making of...* feature, *Running Wild*.

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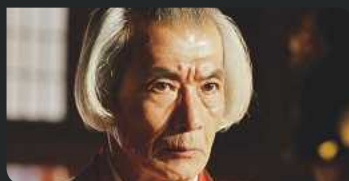
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HERE BE *ragons!*

It may be set in the 18th century, but Keanu Reeve's Samurai fantasy bristles with 21st-century visual effects. Steve May chats to VFX supervisor **Christian Manz**

Shooting in 3D requires doing a lot more work in CG, says Christian Manz: 'With 2D you can get away with quite a bit...'



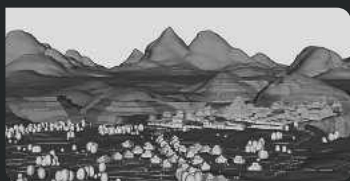


47 RONIN IS based on a tale often told in Japan, a cultural staple about Samurai revenge and ritual seppuku that has enjoyed multiple retellings and interpretations in Japanese cinema and TV. But for this blockbuster American adaptation, starring Keanu Reeves as a sword-wielding former slave, director Carl Rinsch wanted his take to be altogether more mythical, so he turned to

Framestore alumni and Visual Effects Supervisor Christian Manz to develop the fantastical approach.

Having cut his teeth on British TV dinosaur yarn *Primeval*, Manz is a rising star in Hollywood, with a growing catalogue of feature content (*The Golden Compass*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*...) under his belt. As for *47 Ronin*, he told *HCC* he was immediately sold on the idea...





Preliminary sketches formed the basis on which CG renders of *47 Ronin*'s largescale exteriors were created, in this case the Ako fortress

Christian Manz: '*47 Ronin* had a very non-Hollywood script, which is what attracted me to it in the first place. Although it has a fantasy edge, director Carl Rinsch was adamant that he didn't want it to look like *Clash of the Titans*. We were looking at the films of Hayao Miyazaki, going for that sort of look for our creatures. A bit more off-kilter to what would be the norm in a Western blockbuster. We wanted it to have a very Japanese appearance...'

value was there before we had even started, we just had to add a bit more scale.'

The decision to shoot *47 Ronin* in 3D was taken during pre-production. How did that impact your special effects plans?

'It meant we had to do more with CG. When you're shooting 2D you can get away with quite a bit. If you have a creature running through a forest you can

Is it true the furthest East you actually managed to get was Shepperton?

'There was an early recce to Japan, but this led us to decide that the world of Japan that we have in our mind from blockwork prints and Studio Ghibli movies doesn't necessarily exist. A lot of Japan actually looks like the UK – and we would have had to create the world digitally anyway...'

'We decided that anything the actors were near or could touch would be real, and we'd just extend digitally beyond'

Despite the fantastical nature of the story, the movie seems rooted in old-school reality. How much was shot against green screen?

'Most of it was shot on real sets, actually. We rented fields and built two castles on them, but we had to vastly extend those and make them look like they were in Japan and not Surrey. All our stage work was in Budapest, so even then there was a lot of work to make it feel as if it was in eighteenth-century Japan.'

waggle a few brushes around, shoot some elements and composite those in. But when you're doing that same scene in stereo you have to place those elements at exactly the right depth and position. The opening sequence has a Kirin beast running through Windsor Great Park (as it was), which was covered in ferns. We had to take all the real ferns out in the path of the Kirin and replace them with CG ferns, so that when the creature ran through that scene it was hitting all the ferns in the right place. There was also a lot of collaboration between teams. We would ask the set department to put a roof on a building, if it was in a lot of shots, as that would save us having to put it in later on. With the 3D element, it just makes things look more real.'

Wouldn't it have been easier to go full CG, like Zack Snyder's *300*?

'As a supervisor I would always opt for enhancing reality. Production designer Jan Roelfs and I decided that anything the actors were near or could touch would be real, and we'd just extend digitally beyond. The castle in the third act was the biggest set. There was a courtyard and you could walk up a massive ramp – it was huge. Our job was to add CG extensions to the width and get rid of surrounding Shepperton. The good guy's castle was less large – we had one courtyard and a pavilion which we just doubled for a lot of other parts of the castle, which we extended with CG. Dutch Island, a massive interior boat set, and the Tengu lair also had real geography. When you're filming in stereo 3D it's nice to shoot real stuff. It also meant that the production

***47 Ronin* was a massive project in terms of VFX. Do you think it got the attention or respect that it deserved?**

'It's sad it slipped under the radar a bit last year, but I think there's award-worthy work in there. The production design is amazing. It was always going to be a big project.'

The movie seemed to take an age to get from set to screen...

'Yes, I was on it much longer than anticipated. >



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Question:

Keanu Reeves also starred in which science-fiction saga?

Answer:

- A) Alien B) Star Wars
C) The Matrix

Email your answer (including your postal address) with '*47 Ronin*' as the subject heading to competitions@homecinemachoice.com – and see p80 for T&Cs.

The scene-stealing dragon at the film's finale was actually conceived and added during the post-production stage



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The Kirin design started from the Japanese beer label, according to Manz. CG modelling built the six-eyed creature through layers, including its eye-catching shaggy mane

I first became involved in October 2010. We read the script here at Framestore and I did a pitch to get the work to the studio. One week later I was on a plane to LA, to join early pre-production.

'The movie actually began shooting in March of 2011, and lasted for around five months. Then we went into nearly two years of post-production. During post, we wanted to elaborate on some parts of the

'There are films with crazy numbers of VFX houses working on them – my job was to bring some cohesiveness to the work'

story, so we did some additional photography towards the end of 2012, which meant extra visual effects – that was basically the dragon at the end of the movie.'

That was a pretty sizable addition to add to the mix at the eleventh hour...

'There was always an end battle with Kai (Reeves), we just changed who he was fighting. We didn't want a standard fire-breathing dragon, either. I came up with the idea of the dragon magically using the fire in lanterns, rather than fire it belches. That just doesn't happen with dragons in Japan, it's a very Western thing...'

What point of reference did you use for your creature design? Did you delve back into Japanese mythology?

'Yeah, we definitely did. Actually, for the Kirin, we started with the beer label. And then we just took off in our own direction. Our Kirin had six eyes, whereas a 'real' Kirin doesn't. All mythological creatures tend to be made up of other animals.'

It sounds like a lot of fun, but what does being a Visual Effects Supervisor actually entail?

'I was effectively the VFX supervisor for Universal, which meant I was working with Framestore and

ROARING SUCCESSES

From the 1920s to now, five of our fave movie dragons

Smaug



This flame-thrower only makes a cameo appearance in the first ...*Hobbit* flick, but gets its moment of glory in the sequel

Vermithrax

In 1981's *Dragonslayer*, this elderly beast has been upsetting the locals for 400 years – until they blow it up

Maleficent



The most memorable of Disney baddies, Maleficent has the handy knack of turning into a dragon when she wants to

Unnamed dragon

The huge monster in Fritz Lang's 1924 fantasy *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* is a masterclass in early SFX

Dragon

The only character able to keep Donkey on the straight and narrow in the *Shrek* series...

five other visual effects companies, splitting my time between London and LA where the cut was being done. It's not unusual to do this – there are films with crazy numbers of VFX houses working on them, but my job was to bring some cohesiveness to the look of the work.

'Some individual scenes in the movie were split between two FX houses. For example, during the combat tournament, where you have Kai in his red armour fighting the Lovecraftian giant Samurai, looking one way was one company, while looking another was a second company. My job was to work with the supervisors and artists within each of those houses. The idea was to keep a single design thread running through the movie.'

When it comes to technology, there's a concerted move toward 4K film production but visual effects still seem to be rendered in 2K regardless...

'Well that's being driven by what we're asked to do. Ultimately it depends on the filmmakers. The Christopher Nolans and Alfonso Cuaróns of this world will always want to push the envelope with technology, however *47 Ronin* was shot 1,920 HD. But camera technology was evolving even during our shoot. We shot on an ARRI Alexa, and by the end of filming we could have shot 3K to disc; we couldn't do that at the beginning. When we were doing the reshoots we effectively had to go back and use old technology.'

Finally, is the cost of VFX rendering at 4K resolution still too prohibitive for movies?

'At Framestore we're certainly doing a lot more commercials with 4K finishing, but with movies at the moment it all comes down to data management and render time.

'It's money basically. So we're driven by what our clients want. Actually, I'm quite happy to be working in 2K, it's great' ■

47 RONIN is available on BLU-RAY™ with ULTRAVIOLET™ & DVD from 12 May 2014.
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Look, but don't touch



This projection/7.2 system offers grown-up AV in a space where the pitter-patter of tiny feet is never too far away

THIS ELEGANT MEDIA room was designed by Essex company Simply Cinemas, for a movie fan who wanted a space that could quickly switch between bigscreen projection and regular living area. More importantly, inquisitive young children meant that nothing was to be 'on show' when the system was not in use. With that in mind, the finished room features wall-hung speakers, a drop-down projector screen, AV components tucked out

of sight in a low-slung cabinet and even two 'invisible' subwoofers.

What the client wants, he gets

The speaker array, which is a 7.2 setup, is all from Artcoustic. On this occasion the owner approached the installer, already decided that this brand was his preferred option. 'We'd used them on a number of occasions before and can vouch for the results,' explains Simply

Cinema's MD, Simon Swords, 'but it was unusual for the suggestion to have come from the client, rather than us. It turned out he had seen and heard a colleague's system and had been blown away by them. I think the reason he loved them so much is that, as the stereotype could have predicted, his wife would otherwise not have allowed such an elaborate system to have been installed in, what is effectively, their main lounge.'



ROOM CHECKLIST

ARTCOUSTIC: 3 x Artcoustic 65-50 SL 8-4 on-wall loudspeakers with grille artwork for L/C/R

ARTCOUSTIC: 4 x Architect SL 2-1 in-ceiling loudspeakers

ARTCOUSTIC: 2 x Linax Subwoofers and 2 x PA-750 power amplifiers; matching Artcoustic Linax AV cabinet

JVC: DLA-X35 Full HD/3D projector

SCREEN RESEARCH: Drop-down projector screen

YAMAHA: RX-A1030 AV receiver

SONY: Blu-ray player

SKY: Sky+HD

Knowing the speakers that he wanted didn't extend to model numbers or system specifics – so a site visit from Artcoustic and showroom demos were needed to eventually nail down the array, which uses a trio of 65-50 SL 8-4s for the front soundstage, and in-ceiling 2-1 SLs for the surrounds (the room layout precluded on-wall speakers in the ideal position). The seven-channel system was calculated to be capable (in tandem with



With the screen up, the LCR speakers are on show – artwork grilles keep things stylish

a Yamaha RX-A1030) to deliver 105dB peak output when needed at the sitting position.

The dual woofers are Artcoustic Linax Subs. These cunning camouflaged bass bins look identical to the brand's Linax AV cabinet. The front furniture rack is actually two subs flanking the unit that houses the AVR, BD deck and Sky+HD box amongst other components. This storage solution was chosen in favour of a traditional out-room rack as the property didn't have a suitable area for it. Ventilating the hardware was achieved via ducting run down through the stud wall, joining the cabinets to a small loft space above the cinema room. Cooling and extraction fans in the latter space keep the AV hardware at running temp.

Waiting for 4K

The video-side of the equation sees a JVC DLA-X35 PJ firing at the Screen Research drop-down screen. Simply Cinemas' honcho reveals that they'd had good experience with the JVC in the past. 'That said, the owner would have preferred to have increased his spend and opted for a 4K model, but the standard had not really been properly ratified at that point, so we suggested he spent less for now with a mind to upgrading later on when content became available.'

The projector screen is installed within a new ceiling and was specifically chosen, we're told, 'because of the size of its carcass – it was far smaller than the others available.' The design of the room was conceived in CAD format for approval, before positional information (speakers, projector, screen etc) was added before the first-fix electrics were undertaken. The room was completed as part of a year-long whole-house refurbishment.

Swords reports that on revisiting the property he found hundreds of CDs scattered about the floor at the front of the room.' At first I thought maybe the kids had been wreaking havoc, but actually the owner confessed he had been up rather late the night before, enjoying playing some music "turned up to 11" while the kids had been away with their mum!' He's evidently using the system for more than just movies – 'I've since installed a Sonos Connect and introduced him to Spotify. I don't think he's going to ever leave that room now...' ■

Yamaha's RX-A1030 provides AV processing





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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** SAMSUNG 65in curved 4K LED TV TANNOY

Affordable floorstanding 5.1 system **PIONEER** Slim-line 6.1-channel AV receiver **BOWERS & WILKINS** Revamped 600 Series speaker array **T+A** Do-it-all BD deck/hi-fi system **OPTOMA** Full HD PJ with LED tech **GOOGLE** Chromecast streamer **ROUNDUP** Four Bluetooth speakers go head-to-head **AND MORE!**



Style icon

Sony's W95 TV offers an iconic design – does its performance also impress? See p46

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

John Archer discovers that a high-end 4K TV can still set his pulse racing even if it's no longer technically a flatscreen

Samsung gets ahead of the curve

'OOH, I REALLY want a curved TV!' said nobody ever. But today I find myself testing one anyway, thanks to Samsung's conviction that the future of TV isn't flat. In fact, so sure is the Korean screen king that bent is best that it only offers its top-tier TV technology in a curved flagship model: the 65in UE65HU8500. Is this a case of knowing what's good for us before we do, or just trying to be different for the sake of it?

The curve isn't the UE65HU8500's only 'headline' attraction, of course. It's also got a native 4K/UHD resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 pixels. Now this really is something people – including us – are clamouring for, despite the fact that a year after the launch of the first 4K TVs, native 4K sources are still in painfully short supply.

And whatever impact the curved screen ends up having, there's no denying that it makes for a striking-looking TV. It's got 'how do they do that' geek appeal too, since you can't help but wonder how Samsung has got the light from its edge-mounted LED array to seemingly travel around a corner to illuminate the whole screen.

People thinking of wall-hanging the UE65HU8500 should be wary, though. While Samsung has developed a handy straightforward mounting kit for, the TV's edges do inevitably curl away from the wall in a slightly awkward way.

Getting connected

As with its first 4K TVs, last year's F9000 series, Samsung ships the UE65HU8500 with an external connections box, here equipped with 4K-friendly HDMI 2.0 ports.

Actually, the connection box is much more than just that – it also

contains the new Quad Core Plus processing engine that drives Samsung's flagship beast. So as well as only having to suffer a single video cable going into your TV, Samsung's external brain box means you should be able to simply swap it for a future replacement box (whenever they become available), letting your TV take advantage of new features and connections. This sort of upgradability feels incredibly comforting, and as proof that it really works owners of last year's F9000 UHD Samsung TVs can buy the new external box and benefit from almost all of this new TV's features.

The shift to a 1.8GHz 'Plus' Quad Core system versus last year's 1.2GHz iteration should both boost picture processing speeds and ensure

Samsung's ever-more complex Smart TV service works slickly. The extra picture processing power could benefit Samsung's UHD upscaling engine (a tasty prospect given how well this engine worked last year), and is also used, we're told,

to drive a new depth-enhancement processing system developed to optimise images for curved screen playback.

Samsung's onscreen menus and Smart TV features don't at first glance look substantially different to those found on its 2013 models. Picture setup options still include a huge range of calibration tools, while the Smart TV menus are still based around five separate content hubs.

There are some key changes to the Smart TV system if you seek them out, though. One is that last year's 'Social' hub has been replaced – sensibly – by a game one, with the social media stuff now being included on the previously under-used DLNA/USB hub. Samsung has also developed a new tablet/smartphone control app that brings everything – including second-screen viewing – into one place rather than confusingly requiring you to use multiple apps.

Control has been improved, too. The latest built-in camera is sensitive enough to support finger-based rather than whole-hand gesture controls, and there's a new point-and-click style remote. This zapper also carries a small touchpad and normal navigation buttons in a bid to be all things to all men – even though this does leave the heart of the handset feeling rather congested.

Stellar performance

Squirting my UHD test footage compilation into the UE65HU8500, two things become immediately clear. First, its picture quality is absolutely stellar. And second, the curve isn't the horror show I'd feared it might be. In fact, maybe it actually does improve picture quality in some ways...

Starting out with the general picture qualities that make the UE65HU8500 so delicious to watch, its contrast is exceptional. After some basic work to rein in the excessive contrast and backlight settings Samsung always seems to favour with its presets, the



The additional point-and-click remote makes it easier to navigate the Smart hub

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

65in 4K TV with Smart features and a curved screen

POSITION:

Part of Samsung's flagship TV range for 2014

PEERS:

Sony 65X9005;
Panasonic
TX-L65WT600;
LG 65LA970W



dark cityscape that Colin Farrell looks out over from his balcony in *Total Recall* is presented with a gorgeous combination of inky black depths and bright vehicle lights, with a dynamic range that I wasn't expecting from an edge LED lighting array. There's practically no backlight clouding either, putting to bed a particular fear I'd had about curved screen edge LED technology.

My *After Earth* and *Total Recall* 4K film clips – plus some stunning footage of the Rio carnival – also show a mesmerising touch from the UE65HU8500 with those most important UHD qualities, detail and sharpness. This screen presents every minute detail in the image with utmost precision, and without its impact being reduced by any sort of noise whatsoever. Even better, the sense of extra resolution is hugely boosted versus last year's F9000 sets by more advanced colour handling. A new tech, dubbed PurColour, has been introduced to

'Samsung's beefed-up processing results in the best 4K upscaling performance I've seen to date'

the HU8500 series that shortens the colour processing 'path' and works with 192 colour adjustment points compared to just 27 last year. And it works brilliantly well, delivering levels of colour subtlety perfectly suited to 4K's extra resolution – much like the results witnessed last year from Sony's bespoke Triluminos technology.

In fact, I'd suggest the impact Samsung's improved colour handling has on the image is a handy reminder – with numerous ultra-cheap 4K sets looming on the horizon – that you need more than mere pixels to deliver the maximum 4K effect...

Poetry in motion

The UE65HU8500 shows significant steps forward for Samsung with its motion handling. I found that the extra processing power means you can now leave Samsung's motion handling processing active – at least on its least powerful setting – to enjoy crisper motion resolution without the picture exhibiting many unwanted side effects.

Picture depth is delightful. The panel's ability to resolve smaller details lets it keep images looking sharp much further into the virtual distance. And on the Samsung this great advantage of 4K is given extra impact by the curved screen.

Yes, you read that right. I really did suggest that the screen's gentle curve has a beneficial impact on picture quality. Deal with it.



The external connections box features the usual AV inputs – and offers a future upgrade path



Now that I'm discussing the curve, there's another plus to report: it can help you feel more immersed in what you're watching, as the extremities of the image curl gently into your peripheral vision. And there's still more, for I also found that contrast and colour suffered much less 'drop off' when viewing the screen off-axis than happens with

Samsung's flat TVs. This is not to suggest that the curve is an unmitigated success, though. There are two issues with it. First, the curve causes stretched and/or doubled reflections of any bright objects opposite the screen. Second, if your viewing angle gets wider than 35-40 degrees off-axis, the image geometry starts to look



The gentle concave design certainly gives Samsung's TV living room appeal

uncomfortable and can become tiring as your brain tries to compensate.

Both of these issues are, of course, manageable – you just need to have your room set up properly. Granted, that may not apply to every consumer, but anyone spending £4,000 on a TV ought to want to get the best out of it.

So while I'm not yet convinced that some day all TVs will be concave, I've decided that curving the screen isn't the pointless, distracting waste of time I'd frankly anticipated it would be.

Dragging myself away reluctantly from native 4K content to upscaled HD – both the gorgeously detailed *Captain Phillips* Blu-ray and the infamously noisy final Harry Potter disc – the UE65HU8500 soon puts the smile back on my face courtesy of the best upscaling engine I've seen to date. The way it uses its beefed-up processing power to first remove noise and then add extra, accurate pixels of picture information to HD sources is genuinely remarkable.

You can still see the difference between native hi-res and upscaled HD content, of course. But Samsung's upscaling is an incredible effort and certainly makes the wait for more 4K content (which the brand itself will be introducing via its forthcoming HDD-based movie download platform) more bearable.

Active ambitions

If you're still keeping faith with 3D, the UE65HU8500 continues to thrill. Samsung's active approach means it upscales 3D Blu-rays to Ultra Hi-Def, a move that helps make the 3D world feel denser and thus more tangible and immersive. Again the curve doesn't do any harm in this regard either, enhancing, for instance, the sense of depth and spatial relativity with the intensely complex 3D sequences on show when the debris first hits the space shuttle in *Gravity*.

The 3D preset is rather overcooked, causing some backlight clouding, over-egged detailing and stressy looking edges. You'll need to tame the backlight and sharpness settings for both issues to become less distracting.

Sealing what's already a mouthwatering AV deal – surprisingly given Samsung's previous fallibility in this area – is an excellent audio performance. A duct system on the TV's rear gives the 60W speaker array enough space to deliver far more bass and a much more open mid-range than you will hear from many less-premium 'flat' TVs. The system can go seriously loud without distorting or causing cabinet rattle too, making it one of the most movie-friendly performances I've heard from a down-firing speaker system.

So Samsung has undoubtedly achieved greatness with its new range-topping TV. As well as delivering considerable improvements to its 4K picture quality and audio performance, it's knocked a full grand off the price of last year's equivalent models and has even managed to just about sell me on the curve design. Some will no doubt want a regular flatscreen – but those who do invest in the UE65HU8500 can rest assured that there's more to it than its styling ■

ON THE MENU

→ Samsung's user interface enjoys a gentle polish for 2014 rather than a complete overhaul, with tweaks to the Smart TV system improving usability. The Quad Core Plus chipper makes navigation feel incredibly smooth

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (with two pairs of glasses)

4K: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution

TUNER: Yes. Freesat HD and Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI 2.0; Ethernet; component video input; 2 x composite video inputs; 3 x USB

SOUND: 60W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,451(w) x 848(h) x 111(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 26.8kg

FEATURES: Curved screen; extensive Smart features including Netflix, LoveFilm/Amazon Prime and the four key UK catchup TV services; built-in Wi-Fi; colour and gamma management; Depth Enhancement processing; 1,200Hz motion processing; multimedia playback via DLNA or USB

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE65HU8500

→ £4,000 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0845 310 8000

HIGHS: Stunning picture quality with all sources; feature- and content-rich smart system; upgradable connections and processing; good audio performance

LOWS: The curve can cause reflection issues; picture presets overcooked (especially 3D)

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

40 BOWERS & WILKINS 683 THEATRE → Approx £2,750



Adam Rayner auditions the 683 Theatre, B&W's latest home cinema package, and finds its mid-range price point hides some high-end traits

Into the valley of AV rode the 600...

THE 600 SERIES has been part of B&W's speaker lineup for many years now, offering movie fans a first step on the brand's floorstanding ladder below the CM Series and the 800 Series Diamond. In that regard it could be classed as 'entry-level', if it wasn't for both the price demanded and the technology used.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Mid-price 5.1 floorstanding speaker array

POSITION:

B&W's entry-level floorstanding setup

PEERS:

KEF Reference Series R100 5.1; Monitor Audio Silver 6 AV12

Much like the Tannoy Mercury system reviewed on p50, the 600 Series has been upgraded for 2014. B&W describes it as 'radically revamped,' with six new speaker models sporting improved designs and driver wizardry.

The new products are the top-model 683 floorstander (£1,150 per pair), the smaller 684 floorstander (£800 per pair), the 685 and 686 bookshelf speakers (£500/p and £300/p respectively) and the HTM61 (£550) and HTM62 (£350) centre channel enclosures.

The £2,750 package tested here, dubbed the 683 Theatre, uses the 683s for L/R duties, 686s for surrounds and the HTM61.

The three subwoofers in the 600 Series (this system uses the ASW610XP) have been carried over from before, but now sport updated finishes.

Not a curve in sight

With speakers, the cabinet is more than a mere way to ensure there is bass. It is the manufacturer's statement of its furniture-making prowess, and premium speakers tend to be made with achingly gorgeous cabinets surfaced with cost-no-object woods and fourteen-odd layers of lacquer. Not here, though. The 600 Series employs simple square-edged boxes – not a chamfer, not a curve nor a bend in sight. They're somewhat reminiscent of my ancient last-of-the-sheds Volvo, in fact.

Still, these enclosures are solid and with as small a front face as possible without

interfering with the drivers. So, to allow as much cubic as necessary to get the largest sound from said drivers, they go back a fair way.

And by way of compensation for the rudimentary styling, the drivers in these boxes are a synergy of cunning. And don't just take my word for it. The top-quality performance that the 683 Theatre set offers – I'll tell you now that it's as astonishing to hear as it is unremarkable to look at – is a clear product of B&W's engineering nous.

Firstly, you get an edgeless Kevlar midband in every speaker. These are a slice of B&W legend, made to be able to sell into the original 600 Series. But completely new are the lower frequency units made from dual-layer aluminium, where the main cone is reinforced around its edge by a second layer. I know a tad about metal cone technology from my previous life as a loudspeaker production manager, and know that the advantage of this is a very high level of rigidity, to get real piston action.

Then there are the tweeters, specially designed for the new 600 Series. As with other B&W designs, these feature Nautilus tube rear-chamber loading, wherein the back wave is absorbed and directed off down a tapering tube rather than affecting the excursion of the dome itself. Furthermore, and good news for those of use whose lifestyles just cannot realistically include loudspeakers with vapour-deposited diamond domes (as in B&W's reference 800 series) the 600 Series introduces a Decoupled Double Dome tweeter. >

The 600 Series features all-new tweeter and bass driver technology



The HTM61 uses dual 6.5in bass drivers and is the larger of two new centre channel enclosures

This comprises a pair of skinny aluminium domes, one mounted to the other, with the whole assembly then suspended (decoupled) by a cushioning gel ring. The result is the fastest, sweetest, highest-reaching, lowest-distorting tweeter I ever heard outside of über-premium leaf and electrostatic designs, or else those fabled made-out-of-diamond jobs. Simply marvellous.

I was initially sceptical of the ASW610XP subwoofer, as I run a 15in model in my usual setup. Yet its meaty 10in driver (a composite of Kevlar fibre, resin and paper pulp) is backed up a 500W Class D amplifier and rear-panel EQ switch settings. I left mine in the 'EQ A' position for greatest extension. The box itself is dressed in a nice, tactile, smooth black finish. It looks cute, but don't let that fool you....

Immediately impressive

The very moment you fire these up – even if just with one speaker wire, as they all arrive with gold-plated jumper plates joining paired binding posts – you can appreciate the speed and class of their driver complements.

I finally got to see *Frozen* on Blu-ray and discovered not only why it won its Best Animated Movie Oscar, but that it also has a delightful surround mix. It starts with a multichannel choral score, very well recorded, and with the 683 Theatre it was just delicious. Every voice all around me was distinct yet characterful – the timbre was just so real, I could hear their faces. The tinkliest crystalline

sounds of magically-forming ice, and the soaring power of Idina Menzel's voice, were searing yet pure.

The midband from those distinctive yellow Kevlar drivers offers potent snap, as evidenced when Olaf the snowman belly-surfs down the mountain, yelling manically. His voice flies around the soundstage at speed as the

'The scale of the 683 Theatre's sound, and its sheer dynamism, make it absurd value for money'

camera follows his progress, with the B&W system showing smooth, seamless pans.

Frozen's wrought soundtrack includes both crescendoic sequences and a degree of close-miked SFX, helping to show off the B&Ws' dynamics and scale. This package can go from conversational to really, frighteningly loud without sounding strained, all the while underpinned by the ferocious ASW610XP sub.

In a 'toon mood, I dug out an old favourite with an equally amazing soundmix, *WALL-E*. This starts with many, many audio layers, beginning with an old show tune, zooming into Earth past the space junk debris zone, and arriving on the deserted planet and the lonely robot. As you travel into the atmosphere and the town overrun with rubbish, the music becomes background, reverberating in the imaginary canyons. The sense of space and remote desolation created by the 683 Theatre takes a huge amount of quality, separating it from true entry-level systems. The sheer size, yet delicate overtones, of the echoes through these tweeters and lightning-fast drivers is goosebump-raising. Likewise, as the camera zooms in on the happy little bot, there's a clanky, impactful rattling sound from his breaking 'shoes'. Again, the 683s' delicacy shows through, disgorging sound designer Ben Burtt's effects with relish and clarity.

Thrilling performer

The scale of the 683 Theatre's sound and its sheer dynamism, the speed of rise time, the deeply capable musicality of the main speakers and the tremendous aplomb and power of the small 10in subwoofer, all combine to make it absurd value for money. Certainly, it is not a look-at-me designer system – the speakers just look like, well, speakers – but it sounds superb. I'm toying with the idea of buying it myself, as I enjoyed it immensely. Put another way, no buyer of B&W's new array will be anything other than thrilled at the performance for the price. The 600 Series was definitely worth revamping ■

SPECIFICATIONS

BOWERS & WILKINS 683

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled double dome aluminium tweeter with Nautilus tube rear-chamber loading; 1 x 6in woven Kevlar FST 'surroundless' midrange; 2 x 6.5in dual-layer aluminium cone bass drivers
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, front-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 52Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 200W
DIMENSIONS: 190(w) x 985(h) x 364(d)mm
WEIGHT: 27.2kg

BOWERS & WILKINS HTM61

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled double dome aluminium tweeter; 1 x 4in woven Kevlar midrange; 2 x 6.5in dual-layer aluminium cone bass drivers
ENCLOSURE: Three-way, rear-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 88dB
POWER HANDLING: 150W
DIMENSIONS: 590(w) x 218(h) x 304(d)mm
WEIGHT: 17.2kg

BOWERS & WILKINS 686

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled double dome aluminium tweeter; 1 x 5in woven Kevlar midband/bass driver
ENCLOSURE: Two-way, front-ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 62Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 85dB
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 160(w) x 315(h) x 229(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4.6kg

ASW610XP

DRIVE UNITS: 10in long-excursion paper pulp/Kevlar fibre resin driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, forward-firing
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 25Hz-140Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 500W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 325(w) x 325(h) x 375(d)mm
WEIGHT: 34.5kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono inputs; stereo speaker-level inputs

HCC VERDICT



Bowers & Wilkins 683 Theatre

→ £2,750 Approx → www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

→ 0800 232 1513

HIGHS: Solid build; fast, fluid multichannel performance with dynamism and bass weight
LOWS: Not the most luxurious-looking cabinets; large centre enclosure

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Brilliance
Pure and Simple



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Multitasking machine

The Caruso Blu is a Blu-ray player like no other. Or it's a desktop speaker like no other. Or is it a pre-amp? **Mark Craven** isn't entirely sure – but is somewhat besotted nevertheless

T+A'S CARUSO BLU is described by its German manufacturer as a 'complete multi-source hi-fi system.' As a product, it's delightfully esoteric – a heavyweight, premium-priced one-box solution that works as a Blu-ray player, media player, CD deck, DAB/'net/FM radio and a Bluetooth dock.

It's undoubtedly a lifestyle product, but one that promises a high level of performance.

Design and build is exemplary, with T+A managing to make what is basically a squat box seem rather stylish. The top plate is a sturdy-feeling slab of brushed metal, while the front fascia offers a large VFD display flanked

by black speaker grilles and a smattering of buttons. Pick it up and you'll discover it weighs a hefty 8kg.

Inside, the Caruso Blu packs a trio of 50W amplifiers to power its five internal speaker drivers (two tweeters, two mid-range units and a woofer) in a stereo configuration. The back

The Caruso Blu sports a robust build and classy design



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
'Multi-source hi-fi system'

POSITION:
Above the Cala stereo receiver in T+A's esoteric lineup

PEERS:
None that immediately spring to mind...

plate features numerous connections, including coaxial and optical digital inputs (the latter, the brand suggests, could be used to make it a TV speaker), analogue stereo inputs, and stereo and subwoofer pre-outs, plus USB (there's one on the front, too), Ethernet and an HDMI output.

The latter connects the Caruso Blu to your TV for use as a BD player. It's also vital for media file playback, as you use your screen (rather than the T+A's front display) to browse and select audio files (format support includes FLAC, WAV and ALAC upto 192kHz/32-bit) from connected sources. The user interface is quite pleasant, with a sensible and responsive design.

A night at the movies

This hulking component performs its BD-spinning duties admirably. Disc-loading times are reasonable, it provides 3D support and

doesn't appear to impart any unwanted additional processing to the 1080p image. BD-Live is even an option for those that like to party like its 2008.

As a one-box audio solution the Caruso Blu does a good job. There's a clear, approaching clinical, side to its delivery that I find appealing. The clarity in the higher frequencies is good enough to make you aware of details that often go unnoticed on convenience-first products, be it the flicks of a plectrum on a guitar string during the opening passages of Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Free Bird*, or the quietly wailed backing vocals during The Rolling Stones' *Sweet Black Angel*.

Balance across the frequency spectrum is superb. There's sufficient power here in the lower midrange to drive rhythm sections forward – kick drums hit hard, basslines are beautifully defined – but not too much low-end oomph to detract from the mids and highs. Give it some modern electronica (such as Skrillex's *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites*) and its lively presentation seems a perfect fit. And the better-quality audio you can feed it, well... the better. With CDs it retains a smooth grip on proceedings – lossy Bluetooth streaming can sound a bit fractious under the guidance of this revealing amp/driver combo.

The stereo spread of its in-built speakers is somewhat restricted, however – the panned guitar drones of Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love* sound rather confined – and this is where you might want to add your own dedicated pair and use the Caruso Blu's own amps. Except you can't – you'll need either active designs (perhaps T+A's own CM Active Minis) or a stereo amp fed by the pre-outs.

Another criticism of the Caruso Blu is that it's a little bit of a bumpy ride to drive. Part of this can be attributed to its sheer wealth of feature options, but the combination of the front-panel buttons and supplied handset takes some getting used to. Indeed, having lived with the T+A for a good few weeks, I'm still not entirely comfortable with it. It's crying out for smart device control.

Also, I'm not entirely sure where the Caruso Blu belongs in my household. I've moved it from office to dining room to living room – taking advantage of its numerous talents – but it hasn't stayed put in any of them. Ideally it would connect to a TV, as discussed earlier, but I've enjoyed its punchy, in-er-face sonics most as a desktop speaker.

And, call me a completist, but I was certainly expecting SACD compatibility to be amongst the player's many skills.

Overall, then, the odd-ball Caruso Blu is worth considering. It's a carefully engineered audio solution, with plenty of other strings to its bow, that can make a good few other components immediately redundant. Yet its price and lack of app control count against it ■

ON THE MENU



→ T+A's menus are beautifully designed, with a simple left-right structure revealing further options for Audio, Display, Network, System, etc. It's also here where you can browse audio – and video – files stored on a network/USB

SPECIFICATIONS

DISC PLAYBACK: Yes. Blu-ray (including 3D), DVD and CD

DRIVERS: 2 x 16mm dome tweeters; 2 x midrange drivers; 1 x woofer

AMPLIFICATION: Yes. 3 x 50W
CONNECTIONS: 2 x USB; Ethernet; headphone jack; HDMI output; 2 x stereo analogue inputs; stereo analogue output; subwoofer output; optical digital audio input; coaxial digital audio input

DIMENSIONS: 280(w) x 180(h) x 180(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8kg

FEATURES: Wi-Fi onboard; Bluetooth audio streaming; vTuner internet radio; FM/DAB tuner; media file playback from USB and network (including MP3, WAV, WMA, AAC, FLAC, Ogg-Vorbis, LPCM, ALAC, and AIFF); VFD front-panel display; onboard DSP

HCC VERDICT



T+A Caruso Blu

→ £3,000 Approx → w

HIGHS: Exceptional build and neat design; loaded with features; impressive AV performance; extensive connectivity

LOWS: Complicated to operate; narrow stereo image; somewhat pricey...

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

46 SONY KDL-55W955 → Approx £1,600

FLARES!
American Hustle
brings the
fashions of the
1970s to life
on BD, p98



The W95 series is Sony's current
Full HD flagship

Steve May gets to grips with a Full HD set that employs a chunky bezel to tackle flatscreen audio demons

Meet Sony's soundbar slayer

TRIVIAL PURSUIT PIECE. Cheese. Door stop. Shoe. Rogue Squadron pilot. The humble wedge has many uses. This year, we can add TV design to that illustrious list, as Sony introduces a wedge shape to its higher-end TV line-up. Individualistic it may be, but it transpires that there's sound sense behind the move.

Good design, after all, is a combination of form and function, and here the wider base of the wedge cabinet has been used to house a pair of decent, downward-firing Long Duct speakers. For those frustrated by uninspiring flatscreen audio this can only be good news.

But the KDL-55W955's design quirks don't stop here. The set's boots are similarly noteworthy. These affix at the left and right screen edges, creating a wide-footed stance that will challenge some AV furniture. While there's a secondary fixing to move the feet more central, this spoils the aesthetics. Meanwhile the top-mounted Full HD Skype camera isn't integrated into the bezel and instead is lashed up Heath-Robinson USB style.

Connection highlights are four HDMI's, one of which is ARC and MHL compliant, three USB inputs (one assigned for HDD recording duties), Ethernet and optical digital output. Wi-Fi is integrated.

There's also a rear-mounted control-pad, should you lose one of the two remotes supplied. In addition to the IR zapper, which now comes festooned with a variety of shortcuts including Social View, Netflix and Football, there's a simplified RF touchpad remote designed specifically to work with the new Discovery bar element of the set's UI.

The aforementioned Football mode automatically engages a sound DSP intended to emulate a Brazilian stadium. Apparently it's based on actual measurements, which must mean that visiting said venue is akin to sticking your head inside a plastic bucket whilst dancing the Samba.

That's entertainment!

Not only has Sony reinvented the telly form factor for this set, the brand's Smart interface has also been overhauled. Selecting SEN (Sony Entertainment Network), whips you away to a silo'd app window where your most-used services reside. Sony still only offers partial catch-up, in the form of BBC iPlayer and Demand 5, which is a little disappointing. Other streaming attractions include Amazon, Netflix, Mubi, Sony's own movie streaming service and YouTube. The full unfettered selection consists largely of junk.

New this year is the One Flick Discovery bar, which sits at the bottom of the screen and filters/recommends things to watch, from broadcast to online content. You can also keyword search specifics. As a Search tool it's very powerful.

A less successful introduction is Social View, which issues a stream of tweets across the bottom of the screen which either relate to the TV show being broadcast or specific search terms. The end result is rather distracting, not least for others in the room who may actually prefer to watch the TV *au naturel*. And as there's no expletive filtering, it's hardly a suitable feature for family viewing.

Despite some big connected ideas, the actual execution is undermined by the set's operational speed, or rather lack of it. The TV sometimes appears to struggle to keep up. 'Please Wait' messages are

The smaller touchpad handset is tailored for Discovery bar use



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Top-end Full HD connected TV

POSITION:
The step-up screen to Sony's W85 line, and the last word before 4K

PEERS:
Samsung UE55H8000;
Panasonic TX-55AS802



not uncommon, and just manoeuvring around the UI can see the menus shudder and stutter with effort. It's far from buttery smooth.

On the plus side, image quality borders on top-notch. The set doesn't offer any deep calibration trickery, but then doesn't really need it. For the best clarity without unwanted ringing artefacts, set Sharpness to around 30. Any less, and the image blurs significantly. Finer details are enhanced by Sony's proprietary X-Reality Pro processor which manages the difficult job of improving subjective resolution without adding artifice.

The TV couples Sony's X-Tended Dynamic Range processing to wide gamut Triluminos colour, resulting in bold, beguiling images. Jack Asher's lurid cinematography on Terence Fisher's *Dracula* (1958), as played back on the remastered Blu-ray set from Lionsgate, provides the perfect palette to push the panel. The movie's preponderance of rich red curtains and drapes positively glow on the screen, while the use of velvety greens and purples are lush without ever seeming radioactive (a typical flaw of lesser LCDs).

Motion resolution, a long-standing strength of Sony, is consistently above average. Warranting a Motionflow XR 400Hz rating, the set offers a range of interpolation cocktails, most of which taste great. For studio content and sports, use Motionflow Clear which combines crisp clean images with a fulsome 1080 lines of moving resolution (measured at 6.5ppf). Avoid the Smooth preset, though. This imparts smudgy motion artefacts around moving objects, without retaining any high resolution detail. The Standard setting is a better bet; motion resolution is around 800/850 lines. True Cinema looks similar, but

motion resolution here drops to around 700 lines. Alternatively, just turn Motionflow off whenever you get out the popcorn.

The panel itself delivers deep, smooth blacks (but not best-in-class) with punchy contrast. Night scenes are inky without sacrificing too much shadow detail. And while there are some uniformity errors, backlight illumination is generally good. The backlight gives the best results when set on 4.

The TV employs passive 3D, with two pairs of glasses supplied. Stereographic images prove comfortable to watch, although the lack of resolution is noticeable. Still, Disney's *Tangled* remains bright and immersive, so bespectacled viewers are unlikely to complain.

The W95's wedge-enhanced audio performance proves to be very satisfying. There's appreciable volume from the on-board S-Force 2x 10W digital amplifier, as well as mid-range heft. There's really no incentive to add a soundbar (apart from a very good one) to augment audio.

While the W95 has an integrated media server for playing content from both networked devices and USB, it's a bit rubbish. The player repeatedly stopped working from two different NAS devices, and even balked when accessing USB (normally the bullet-

'Good design is a combination of form and function – Sony's engineers have nailed it with the W95'

proof option). Video support, when it worked, covers a host of codecs and containers, including MKV, MP4 and WMV. Audio spans MP3, AAC/M4A, WMA and WAV. Music plays with album art if it's available.

Conclusion

Overall, the KDL-55W955 can be considered an accomplished AV performer, yet with a somewhat curmudgeonly personality. Hopefully Sony will address the unreliability of its media server software – it fails too frequently to be forgivable – but other aspects of its connectability can't be changed. The 2014 app user interface is a mixed bag; aping rivals too closely for comfort and not offering a particularly seamless user experience, although conversely the One Flick Discovery bar is a worthwhile content search and filtering tool.

Where it does warrant plaudits is its performance. The wedge design has been successfully exploited to bolster audio, and bodes well for the forward-facing speaker iteration coming to the brand's second-gen 4K sets. Full HD picture clarity is high, with vibrant colour fidelity and great dynamics ■

ON THE MENU



→ The green-tinged Smart interface is littered with apps for quick access. You can overlay the more pared-down menus, such as Settings

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive (two pairs of glasses supplied)
4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD; satellite

CONNECTIONS: 4x HDMI; Scart; component; 3 x USB; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; CI slot

SOUND: 2 x 10W

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 'More than one million'

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,240(w) x 790(h) x 92(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 19.5kg

FEATURES: Motionflow XR400; media server playback from USB and network; integrated Wi-Fi; X-Reality PRO processing engine; Clearaudio +; One-Flick Discovery UI and Sony Entertainment Network; Skype; Miracast; Social View; Triluminos display; Wedge design; numerous picture presets including Vivid, Standard, Custom, Cinema1 and Cinema2; Advanced Contrast Enhancer

HCC VERDICT



Sony KDL-55W955

→ £1,600 Approx → www.sony.co.uk
→ Tel: 0845 6000 124

HIGHS: Excellent image detail and motion resolution; Wedge design; Discovery content bar
LOWS: Clunky app portal; sluggish behaviour; unstable media server; ugly Skype camera; Social View nonsense

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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CARY **C** AUDIO

50 TANNOY MERCURY Vi → Approx £1,000

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1-channel speaker package

POSITION:
An upgrade of 2012's Mercury V system, below the Precision series

PEERS:
Roth OLi RA;
Monitor Audio
Radius R90HT1;
Cambridge Audio
Aero



Soft fabric tweeters have been replaced with new magnesium alloy designs

Refreshed and ready to roll

Danny Phillips finds out if Tannoy's 2014 overhaul of its affordable Mercury speaker line is enough to keep it near the top of his audition list

'IF IT AIN'T broke don't fix it' goes the saying, but no-one told Tannoy. Its affordable Mercury V speaker system blew my socks off back in 2012, but that hasn't stopped the company tinkering with the fifth-generation blueprint in a bid to further pimp up its performance. The result of this tweakage is the Mercury Vi system (not 'six'), which boasts a number of significant component and tuning upgrades but retains the same wallet-friendly prices as the original range.

The key modification is a new magnesium alloy tweeter that replaces the soft fabric unit used by Mercury V, while the crossover and speaker terminals have also been improved.

The lineup includes four models – the V4i front floorstanders, the V7i standmounts, the VRi rears and the VCi centre. The system on test here is a specially-priced 5.1 package that includes a pair of V4i fronts, V7is for the rears, the VCi centre and the TS2.10 subwoofer – the same sub on bass duties with Mercury V.

Despite all the internal tweaks, Tannoy has left the exterior pretty much the same as Mercury V, which isn't great news. The chipboard cabinets are finished in the sort of fake wood veneer you find on IKEA DVD cabinets, lacking the same sense of luxury as the Roth OLi RA or Monitor Audio R90HT1 sets that I've auditioned recently.

Looks-wise it's inoffensive enough, but I'm not keen on the Sugar Maple finish (Dark Walnut is much classier) or the boxy cabinets – a few curves wouldn't have gone amiss.

Despite their lacklustre appearance, the V4i's internally cross-braced cabinets feel satisfyingly robust and heavy. Unlike the Mercury V4s, they come with a plinth kit, which comprises two black bars that screw onto the bottom. It's simple but effective, elevating it off the ground and improving stability.

Yank off the black cloth grille (fixed by stubborn plugs as opposed to magnets) and you'll uncover the V4i's tweaked driver array,

framed by eye-catching silver surrounds. It includes a pair of 6in midbass drivers, with light multifibre coated pulped paper cones, in between which is the all-new magnesium alloy dome tweeter. This material is more rigid than the soft fabric dome used by Mercury V and makes it possible to push high-frequency response up to a claimed 53kHz.

The new crossovers include fresh high-purity silver-plated wiring and Tannoy's

'The boxy Mercury cabinets may look a little staid, but feel satisfyingly robust and heavy'

Differential Material Technology (DMT) damping on the high-frequency capacitors, to help achieve a smoother integration between the new tweeter and midbass drivers.

Rigging up the speakers is easier than before thanks to the improved binding posts – the terminals are now gold-plated and encased in chunky transparent plastic, which makes clamping less fiddly. They'll take banana plugs, too. The V4i's posts are helpfully located at the bottom of the cabinet, and there are two pairs of posts for bi-wiring, one for the tweeter and one for the midbass drivers. Gold-plated link bars connect the two sets of posts for single-wire use.

Tannoy sensibly keeps faith with the same TS2.10 subwoofer as the Mercury V system, which isn't actually part of the Mercury family but proved a good match last time round. It's a real powerhouse, equipped with a 300W Class D amplifier and two opposing 250mm bass drivers – one active, one passive – which eliminates much of the cabinet vibration you get from single-driver subs, says Tannoy. ➤



The V4i floorstanders feature dual binding posts, enabling bi-wired L/R channels

It comes in three finishes, all of which are tasteful but completely incongruous with the other speakers. Bass tweaks are carried out on the back panel – three dials govern volume, phase and crossover frequency.

I loved the performance of the original Mercury V system, which offered gorgeous detailing, terrific bass slam and focused dialogue, and this delivers more of the same. In fact it's an even more detailed and engaging listen than its predecessor, even though certain aspects of its sound won't appeal to everyone.

The detail of desolation

The stunning DTS-HD MA mix of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* provides all the evidence I need that this is a grand well spent. The first thing I noticed is that, as promised, the sound is extremely detailed. Those magnesium alloy tweeters do an inspired job of teasing out the subtleties of the soundtrack – nowhere more so than in the eerie, atmospheric surroundings of Mirkwood.

As Bilbo and his buddies begin their hallucinogenic trudge through the forest, the soft rustle of leaves under the Hobbit's hairy feet is crisp and lucid, while the gentle whispers echo and flutter around the soundstage. Every speaker lavishes these effects with the same level of precision and clarity.

When the group is captured by spiders, there's a moment when everything goes quiet and all you hear is the sound of arachnids scuttling around, wrapping up the dwarves in silk. The Tannoys dutifully dig out every rustle, chirp and click, creating a wonderfully vivid, intimate atmosphere.

This system also has a clear, articulate way with voices, which comes as no surprise given Tannoy's vast experience with public address systems. It's particularly impressive when the Necromancer addresses Azog at Dol Guldur – the Vis lend remarkable depth to both characters' raspy tones but also makes them focused and prominent, as if both were right there in the room with you.

Flick to the dwarves' battle with Smaug at the movie's climax and the system delivers a large and spacious soundstage. It handles the sound of smashing stone pillars and clanking metal effortlessly, while huge blasts of bass engulf the room when the dragon breathes fire.

The subwoofer is quick, agile and powerful, bringing the same sense of depth and scale as it did to the previous pack. However, integration was a slight issue this time round – I could never completely forget it was there and found myself fiddling with the dials more than I'd like – but there's no denying its power and punch, and once I found the right volume and crossover it became less of an issue.

Aside from that, there's an impressive sense of cohesion about everything the Tannoy array does. The use of identical drivers across the system results in seamless panning, while the tweaked mid/high crossover ensures top-to-bottom fluidity. As Smaug swoops around the cavernous halls of Erebor, you're swallowed up in a smooth, even soundstage.

But therein lays the Mercury Vi's only real drawback, if you can call it that – during the movie's most frenetic moments, it's a little too smooth and laid back for its own good. Sure there's energy and volume, but it could do with more snap and slam in the mids to really get the adrenalin flowing. On the plus side, that means you can listen to it for hours without any hint of fatigue, and it's also terrific news for music listeners. The velvety tones are easy on the ear, with wonderful detail and silky mids. The insistent Bossa Nova beats of *Tonight We Dance* by Citrus Sun are quick and tight in stereo mode, with dynamic subtleties such as the varying intensity of hi-hat hits and the song's layers of lilting percussion elegantly conveyed. Considering the price tag, this level of sophistication is not to be sniffed at.

At the end of the day, that price-to-performance ratio is what makes the Mercury Vi enticing. Yes, it looks dull and lacks the flat-out sonic excitement of some rivals, but Tannoy deserves credit for taking a winning formula and improving it without any change in price, delivering a smooth, super-detailed sound that suits both music and films ■

SPECIFICATIONS

MERCURY V4i

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 6in multifibre coated pulped paper cone midbass drivers; 1 x 1in aluminium dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Rear reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 32Hz-53kHz
SENSITIVITY: 91dB
POWER HANDLING: 200W
DIMENSIONS: 204(w) x 995.4(h) x 281(d)mm
WEIGHT: 14.7kg

MERCURY VII

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in multifibre coated pulped paper cone midbass driver; 1 x 1in aluminium dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Front reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 45Hz-53kHz
SENSITIVITY: 86dB
POWER HANDLING: 100W
DIMENSIONS: 170(w) x 300(h) x 254.5(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4.5kg

MERCURY VCI

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4in multifibre coated pulped paper cone midbass drivers; 1 x 1in aluminium dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Twin rear reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 67Hz-53kHz
SENSITIVITY: 90dB
POWER HANDLING: 140W
DIMENSIONS: 140(w) x 430(h) x 170(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4.9kg

TS.10

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in active woofer; 1 x 10in passive ABR
ENCLOSURE: Sealed, side-firing
LOW FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 24Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 300W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 380(w) x 390(h) x 328(d)mm
WEIGHT: 14.5kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo phono input and output

HCC VERDICT



Tannoy Mercury Vi

→ £1,000 Approx → www.tannoy.co.uk

→ Tel: 01236 420199

HIGHS: Fantastic detail reproduction; smooth, easy sound; deep, agile bass; great value

LOWS: Needs a touch more snap; sub not the easiest to integrate; uninspired design

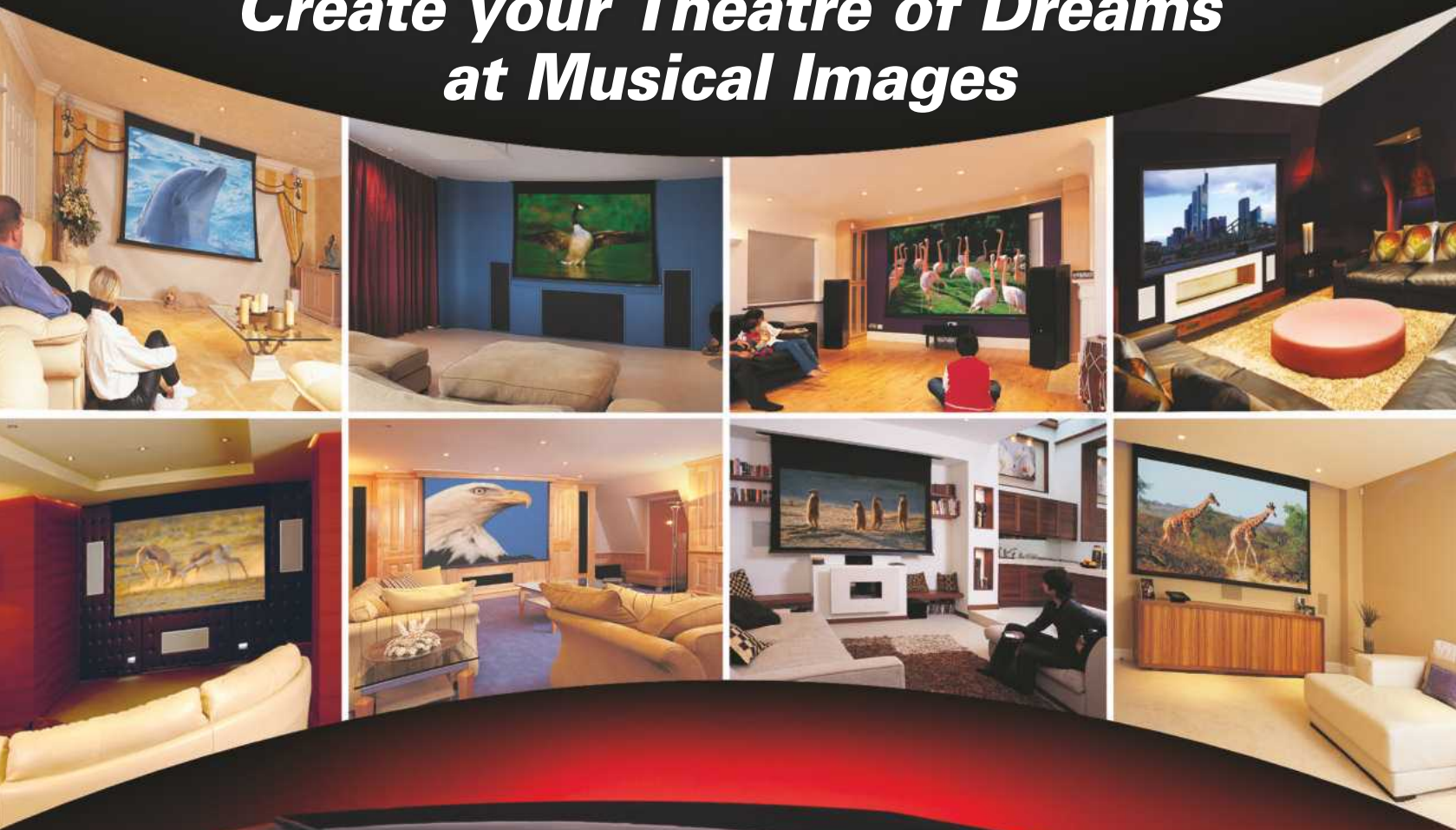
Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Slim-line Samurai slices above its weight

Pioneer's svelte digital AV receiver isn't budget, it's just minimalist, argues **Steve May** – although he wonders if offering six-channel amplification is taking things a bit too far

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Six-channel
networked AVR

POSITION:
Pioneer's entry-level
multichannel
slim-line receiver

PEERS:
Marantz NR1604;
Onkyo TX-NR414

PIONEER IS RIGHTFULLY regarded as a towering force in the upper echelons of the AV receiver world, but the VSX-S510 is an altogether different proposition aimed at the size-sensitive mainstream. The brand's principal competitor in this new surround era comes from the Marantz NR range, specifically the NR1604. It's wrong to consider these slim-line AV receivers as budget options. They're better thought of as minimalist surround solutions. But getting the balance right for a non-traditional AVR buyer isn't easy.

Standing just 85mm tall, the VSX-S510 is not only one of the slimmest multichannel amps available, it's also one of the cheapest. Listed at £399, it's widely available at a modest £329. In addition to the silver livery pictured, it's also shipping in gloss black.

Aesthetically, it strikes the right pose; the fascia is unfussy and clean. Unfortunately the user interface is rather less on-trend. Low-res white text on a black background is primeval by any standard.

Connectivity sides on the right side of sane. Unlike leviathan AVRs, there's no excessive pandering to legacy inputs. You get five rear HDMI inputs and one output, single digital

optical and coaxial inputs, plus analogue stereo inputs and Ethernet. There's an adaptor port for Pioneer's Bluetooth adaptor, the AS-BT200, plus a composite video output. The front fascia harbours an additional HDMI input with MHL support for smartphones, plus an iOS-friendly USB port.

All the speaker binding posts welcome banana plugs, so there's no horrible spring clips to negotiate. There are also two LFE sub outputs plus pre-outs for left/right rear back channels. The latter is important because, curiously, the VSX-S510 is a six-channel receiver. This provision of a single-back channel is a bit of a throwback to early post-processing codecs. If you want a pucker 7.1 listening experience, then you'll need to take those rear channel pre-outs to a secondary two-channel amplifier (of course, no one ever will).

Elsewhere, this receiver cuts few corners. The VSX-S510 offers MCACC (multichannel acoustic calibration). The supplied microphone plugs into the front-facing minijack and takes the receiver through an automated routine to gauge speaker distances, levels and bombasticity from a single prime seating position. Post equalization, there's a distinct



Sensibly, Pioneer's handset features large volume controls



change in timbre: while vocals in particular became thinner in my listening room, the overall balance proved well-judged for most material. It's easy enough to switch EQ in and out at whim if it doesn't quite suit what you're playing, via the Tools button on the remote. Hi-res audio is served by a 192kHz/24-bit DAC.

As the Ethernet jack indicates, this receiver will play audio files from any DLNA-networked device. USB is an option, too. File support covers MP3, WAV, AAC, WMA, FLAC and AIFF. There's no support for DSD and video files are willfully ignored. You can also go online for internet radio services, and the receiver dances with Apple AirPlay, Spotify Connect and Pioneer's own Bluetooth AirJam app.

Lean and agile

One key reason why this model is so svelte is the adoption of cool-running digital amps. Pioneer rates the receiver's output at 65W into eight ohms. Modest perhaps, yet it sounds surprisingly lean and agile. Indeed, I'd rate the VSX-S510 as a tad more exciting to listen to than its key Marantz rival.

In terms of set up, my preferred configuration cocktail was a classic Small speaker with 80Hz crossover brew, which results in a lithe, dynamic multichannel experience. When Keanu Reeves and assorted Samurai tackle the multi-eyed mystical beast in the opening reel of *47 Ronin*, the S510 lends a tangible weight to the CGI creature as it thunders through the bush. A sweep of its tail does a full 360-degree arc in the listening room with phase-matched uniformity.

Speaker terminals include a rear back channel



The opening melee in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* proves equally taut and exciting. The soundtrack clanks and whirls with agile precision, as effects are snapped back and forth. Even when running near the raggedy edge the VSX-S510's performance doesn't significantly unravel.

That solo rear back channel proves to be a waste of space, though. Compared to a carefully installed seven-channel system, a singular rear just sounds ridiculously directional. Pioneer offers a surround back channel processing mode which synthesises audio from any source, but it's like having Optimus Prime standing directly behind you barking into a megaphone. Stick to a regular surround layout is my advice.

HDMI passthrough is a key requirement for any AVR if it hopes to cut it in the modern living room; indeed, the VSX-S510 boasts 4K compatible HDMI jacks. Route your primary source through the receiver and watch it without having to power up the entire system – your significant other will probably thank you

'The Transformers mix clanks and whirls with agile precision, as effects are snapped back and forth'

for the convenience. Yet the Pioneer has an unexpected limitation here. While it boasts assignable digital audio and analogue inputs, you can't actually assign them to any HDMI source. They can only be tethered to audio-only CD and TV inputs. Consequently this means you can't utilise the digital output from a Sky box for 5.1, and leave the HDMI Sky audio in stereo so that it plays on the connected TV. You can fudge this conundrum by not routing your Sky box through the receiver at all, but that's inelegant at best.

If you're looking for an easy-to-house networkable receiver, the VSX-S510 has plenty to offer. The user interface may have been ripped straight from a 1990s caption generator, but the AVR's multichannel performance is grin-inducing. Overall network functionality is good too, although the assignable audio restrictions may be a deal-breaker for Sky viewers. A little more refinement would make this a great receiver. Recommended, but with some operational caveats ■

ON THE MENU

```
Home Menu
▶ 1. Auto MCACC
2. Manual SP Setup
3. Input Assign
4. Auto Power Down
5. HDMI Setup
6. Network Standby
7. MHL Setup
8. Speaker System
9. OSD Setup
```

→ The good thing about Pioneer's user interface is that it's very simple, but we'd argue that a modern product like the VSX-S510 deserves something a little more stylish...

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus DD EX/Pro-Logic II/IIx

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS ES/Neo:6/96/24

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 6 x 110W (four ohms, 1kHz, 1% THD)

MULTIROOM: Yes. Two zones – zone 1 in a 3.1 configuration, zone 2 stereo

AV INPUTS: 2 x digital audio (1 x optical and 1 x coaxial); stereo phono

HDMI: Yes. 6 x inputs; 1 x output

VIDEO UPSCALING: 1080p

COMPONENT VIDEO: No

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 317(d) x 85(h)mm

WEIGHT: 4.1kg

ALSO FEATURING: AirPlay; AirJam; Spotify

Connect support; internet radio via vTuner;

MCACC auto calibration; 4K HDMI passthrough;

media playback over network/USB (MP3, WAV,

AAC, WMA, FLAC, AIFF, Apple Lossless);

Ethernet; 2 x USB; AM/FM Tuner; low power Eco

mode; Advanced Sound Retrieval; Midnight

Listening Mode

HCC VERDICT



Pioneer VSX-S510

→ £400 Approx → www.pioneer.co.uk

→ Tel: 0208 836 3500

HIGHS: Slick, minimalist design; lively multichannel sound quality; solid network audio streaming

LOWS: Basic user interface; HDMI passthrough limitation; not always intuitive to use; not a seven-channel receiver

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Optoma suffers mixed LED fortunes

The projector company's bold attempt to make LED projectors mainstream doesn't quite convince the traditional lamp-loving **John Archer**

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
A DLP home cinema PJ using LED lighting

POSITION:
Towards the top of Optoma's home cinema range

PEERS:
JVC DLA-X35;
Epson EH-TW9200

LED TECH ISN'T just revolutionising television. These bulbs' advantages over normal UHP lamps are also helping LED make a mark in the projector world. There's a problem, though. Using an LED lamp to light a true home cinema (as opposed to 'Pico' DLP pocket) projector has, 'til now, proved an expensive business. You won't get change out of £10,000, for instance, for either SIM2's Mico LED projector or Vivitek's H9080FD. Fair to say, then, that Optoma's decision to flog its new HD91 LED projector for £3,000 has got my attention. This price is no more than I'd expect for a good-quality LCD, DLP, D-ILA or SXRD projector with a normal UHP lamp.

So what are the LED advantages? The main one is that you never have to change the lamp

throughout the lifetime of a projector, as opposed to replacing typical UHP lamps every 2,000-5,000 hours. Since replacement lamps tend to cost hundreds of pounds you could save buckets of cash over the 20,000 hours your LED lamp should be good for.

Of course, having a lamp that lasts 20,000 hours wouldn't be nearly as appealing if that lamp's performance degraded as rapidly as that of a typical UHP lamp. So another cool thing about LEDs is that their performance stays pretty much the same from the moment you first fire them up to the moment they finally fizzle out, with minimal reduction in either brightness or colour performance.

And there's more. Unlike a typical £3,000 DLP projector, the HD91 has a separate LED

lamp for each of its red, green and blue colour components. This means it doesn't need the usual DLP colour wheel, which should make it immune to the fizzing noise over skin tones and 'rainbow effect' colour striping problems.

After all this you're probably halfway to ordering an HD91 already. And the HD91's other features aren't likely to dent your enthusiasm – setup is aided by a healthy 1.9x optical zoom and vertical image shifting. Zoom/focus wheels around the lens deliver adjustment precision.

The HD91 comes with the endorsement of the ISF, too, meaning it has enough calibration features to make a professional

'The HD91 makes a strong impression with HD images. Blu-rays serve up every last pixel of detail'

tweak viable. These features include full colour and white balance management, and a series of gamma presets.

An auto-iris feature is claimed to deliver a huge 500,000:1 contrast ratio. There's also manual adjustment for the LED lamp's light output, noise reduction processing and Optoma's Pure Engine video processing suite complete with elements for boosting detailing, motion reproduction and colour saturations. This engine is clever enough to warrant experimentation, as it doesn't create many niggly side effects. But, aside from liking the way it reduced judder when watching 3D material, for the most part I left it off.

A question of contrast

Unfortunately the HD91's promising specs don't amount to the picture quality I'd hoped for. The main reason for this is a fairly damaging shortage of black level depth compared with most £3,000 rivals. The darkness of the interior spaces of the alien structure in *Prometheus* looks grey rather than

black, making the image flatter and less convincing, as well as hiding some of the subtler background textures. And none of the HD91's picture adjustments provide an adequate solution to this dark dearth, even after removing so much brightness from the image that they ended up looking rather dull.

For instance, the dynamic contrast settings do improve black levels to a degree, but they don't resurrect the missing shadow detail, and worse they also bizarrely lead to shifts in the image's colour temperature so strong that they make the system pretty much unusable.

Optoma's LED system is strong in most other ways. The HD91 has richness, subtlety and naturalism to its colour palette. Average black levels usually result in off-kilter colours, but that doesn't happen here (unless you try to use the dynamic contrast function). Even the tricky skin tones of *Casino Royale's* card games and the 007 torture sequence hold up well despite the fundamental lack of contrast. The use of three separate colour 'sources' in the LED array is clearly helping, as the vibrancy, tonal subtlety and noiseless appearance of the colours highlight the problems rival single-chip projectors can have.

The HD91 also makes a strong impression with the sharpness of its HD images. Blu-rays serve up every last pixel of texture and detail on offer. Clarity holds good when the image contains lots of motion, too, with practically little loss of resolution over moving objects.

With the 3D disc of *...The Desolation of Smaug* the HD91 convinces, handling the HD detailing and keeping the fantasy adventures free from crosstalk ghosting and smoothly rendered. However, the lack of contrast and brightness reduce the sense of depth considerably during dark sequences, making background subtleties tiring to pick out.

Compromised contender

The HD91 certainly has its moments. Colour handling is first-rate, clarity is outstanding, and it runs impressively quietly in fan noise terms. But its lowly contrast is impossible to ignore in this £3,000 market, even considered alongside LEDs practical, cost-saving advantages ■

ON THE MENU

→ The user interface won't win fashion awards, but it makes it relatively painless to get the HD91 up and running, with a neat menu/sub-menu structure and legible text

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active (but 3D glasses and RF emitter are optional extras)

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; VGA port; component video; RS-232C; Ethernet; 2 x 12V triggers

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,000 ANSI Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 500,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 345(w) x 443(d) x 161.5(h)mm

WEIGHT: 7kg

FEATURES: 20,000 hour-lamp life; Pure Engine processing system; ISF certified (colour management, white balance and gamma adjustment); dynamic contrast system; PureMotion and UltraDetail; 2D-3D conversion; 1.9x manual zoom; vertical keystone correction; 1.5:1-2.89:1 throw ratio; 23dB running noise in Eco mode; vertical and horizontal lens shift

HCC VERDICT



Optoma HD91

→ £3,000 Approx → www.optoma.co.uk
→ Tel: 01923 691 800

HIGHS: Ultra affordable for an LED model; colours look excellent; runs quietly; high levels of sharpness

LOWS: Average black levels; high levels of input lag; not especially bright; dynamic contrast feature affects colour tone

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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The Beeb's
Musketeers
makes their BD
debut, p100



Affordable, admirable

Until its 4K sets break cover, this 50-incher is Finlux's flagship TV – yet it still retails for a wallet-friendly £600. **Adrian Justins** finds a lot to admire beyond the price tag, too

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Affordable 50in
Smart LED TV

POSITION:
Currently the only
50in model in
Finlux's line-up

PEERS:
Panasonic
TX-L47ET60B;
Sony KDL-50W829

FINLUX'S PUBLICITY MATERIAL for the 50F8075-T quaintly states that its Full HD panel offers five times the image quality of standard-definition TV footage, and boasts of offering three HDMI ports, to cope with the expected deluge of HD sources. It's easy to mock, but we should never forget that Finlux is a self-confessed follower of TV fashion, preferring to adopt proven technologies rather than create new ones (although somewhat against type it is joining the 4K/Ultra HD party relatively early). And the Finlux name is synonymous with value for money, selling its low-cost wares direct to the public through the web and by phone. Where else can you score yourself a 50in edge-lit LED for just £600?

Alright, the 50F8075-T's panel is vanilla-flavoured 50Hz and there's no picture processor for eradicating blur and judder but the TV does have plenty of preset picture and sound modes and a Wi-Fi dongle is supplied. So it's not completely 'budget'.

Small Smart selection

The latter provides a fuss-free alternative to a wired Ethernet hookup and lets you feed your brain via its Smart TV portal. The video-on-demand content selection is something of a starter pack, but at least you get Netflix and iPlayer, plus a web browser, whilst Twitter and Facebook apps give you the chance to get hashtagging and liking without tearing your eyes away from the final of *Britain's Got Talent*.

The Finlux's twin USB inputs add to the screen's functionality. For instance, you can add a USB camera and get Skyping, or plumb in a hard/thumb drive to make PVR recordings from the onboard Freeview HD tuner.

Certainly the 50F8075-T looks the part before you switch it on, with an ultra-thin bezel crafted from high-quality black gloss plastic. The screen itself is reasonably non-reflective and a nice shade of black. Only the plasticky stand and low-quality finish of the rear panel give the value-for-money game away, with the latter cramming all of its sockets into one small opening (the HDMI ports are only just far enough apart to accept thickly collared plugs). Unusually,

'The Smart system focuses on the key, most sought-after apps, and has a good-looking interface'

there is a coaxial audio output rather than the more often-specified optical, which narrows down the number of soundbars you can use with the set.

The 25cm-long remote control's extensive acreage allows several oversize buttons but many have microscopically small icons and the slightly concave profile of the handset makes it hard to slide your fingers around quickly. At least there are handy keys for directly accessing the set's media browser, Smart TV services and YouTube. There's also a Quick Menu button that lets you hot foot directly to picture modes, sound modes and other settings. But don't bother looking for 3D, like I did, because you won't find it. As Finlux says, it responds to the market.

Usable user interface

A bright blue laser-like LED on the bottom of the frame shines hard when the set is in standby and pulses as the set chugs in to life, taking 15 seconds to come on from standby. Setup and installation won't trouble you, and the onscreen menu system is everything the handset isn't in terms of user-friendliness. The user interface is a bold, legible blend of contemporary fonts and icons in gold, black and white. The menu home page is a translucent band of icons across the screen for picture, sound, settings, installation, channel list and the media browser. No need to go searching around as everything is logically located in the right sub-menu. It's the sort of graphically-rich interface that puts nearly all of the AV receiver industry to shame...

The Freeview HD EPG is similarly decorated so is equally easy to read but it does lose

brownie points by not having a live video feed or aural continuity with the live broadcast.

Calibration-wise, you can adjust obvious parameters on the 50F8075-T, such as contrast and brightness, plus the backlight, noise reduction, dynamic contrast and colour. But there's nothing here that a serious TV-tinkerer will want to sink their teeth into.

On the sound front, the set's two 8W speakers are served by five presets, plus you are invited to play with the EQ sliders between 120Hz and 10kHz. There's a Dynamic Bass option, which I discovered should always be engaged, and a Surround Sound option, which shouldn't, unless you want to enjoy what I'd call Side Sound.

The 50F8075-T may lack a fast refresh rate and elaborate picture processing engine but its pictures are still eminently watchable. There's very little jerkiness and judder to fast-moving subjects, both with drama (*Game of Thrones*) and sport (cricket and football on Sky HD) – objects such as balls and players moving across the screen retain their shape. Static shots have terrific clarity and detail, and a pleasing naturalness; the fine weave of Rob Brydon's jacket in *The Trip* on BBC 2 HD, for example, is nicely rendered. However, motion resolution from Finlux's frill-free panel is not the best, so when the camera moves even an inch the detail in the jacket is lost momentarily. Likewise, football pitches turn mushy during fast pans.

With my Blu-ray of *Oblivion* the same motion resolution weakness is apparent, but again the Finlux's detail came the fore. Colours, meanwhile, although certainly not as punchy as higher-end LEDs, aren't glaringly off-kilter either.

A key tweak with the Finlux is to nudge its backlight setting down from default. The set's illumination is even and doesn't suffer from clouding at its edges, but to get the impressive contrast and shadow detailing that it's capable of it needs taming. Off-axis viewing holds up well.

DLNA networking and USB media browsing with this budget biggie is a mixed bag. Files are listed clearly and are easy enough to scroll through and select, and video file compatibility is excellent, but oddly the set was rather picky about my selection of music files, rejecting WMA, WAV, some FLACs, AIFF and M4A. MP3s were fine, which is probably all most of this TV's target audience will care about.

Best screen yet

Overall, while far from perfect, the 50F8075-T is probably Finlux's best screen yet for picture performance, and for the money is not a bad proposition. The menu system is exemplary and the Smart implementation focuses on the key, most sought-after apps. This direct retailer is definitely moving forward in the right direction. The bigger brands should watch out ■

ON THE MENU



→ This user interface is a treat, combining a tidy icon-based layout for Smart TV (pictured) with easily navigable menu options for picture/sound adjustments and network setup

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; 3.5mm AV in (composite/stereo audio); 2 x USB; Scart; VGA; digital coaxial audio output; headphones jack; Ethernet; CI slot
SOUND: 16W
BRIGHTNESS: N/A
CONTRAST RATIO: 1,200:1
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,125(w) x 650(h) x 65(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 16kg
FEATURES: DLNA; Wi-Fi via USB dongle (supplied); USB media playback (MP3, M4A, WAV, BMP, PNG, AVI, M2TS, M4V, MKV, MOV, MP4, MPEG2 TS, MPG, WMV, XVID); 50Hz refresh rate; internet browser; Picture modes (Natural, Cinema, Game, Sports, Dynamic); Sound modes (Music, Movie, Speech, Flat, Classical, User); Dynamic Bass; Surround Sound; Smart TV apps (BBC iPlayer, Netflix, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Viewster, Dailymotion, Finlux, Joomeo, Red Bull World, Cinetrailer, Flickr, Accu Weather, Play Jam); iOS Touchscreen App; PVR function

HCC VERDICT



Finlux 50F8075-T

→ £600 Approx → www.finluxdirect.com
 → Tel: 0845 459 5282

HIGHS: Decent overall images; slick user interface; value for money

LOWS: Poor motion resolution; weedy sound; cumbersome remote control; audio streaming MP3-focused

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The business of cinema

Vivitek's 1080p light-cannon prepares to do battle with a host of other sub £1,000 home cinema models. **Steve May** finds out if this serious-looking PJ is up to the task



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. 3D DLP Link compatible/Active shutter

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component; composite video; S-Video; stereo analogue audio input; stereo minijack; RS232; USB; 12V trigger

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,500 Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 10,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 285(w) x 129(h) x 261(d)mm

WEIGHT: 3.15kg

FEATURES: Single-chip DLP with DarkChip3 and BrilliantColor; 10W mono built-in audio; 3,500/5,000 Hours (Normal/Eco Mode); 32dB/35dB fan noise in Eco/Normal modes; 1.5x zoom; 1.39-2.09:1 throw ratio; 240W power consumption (Eco mode)

WHILE THERE'S A definite whiff of boardroom fan heater about this projector's design, the H1185HD is lightweight and compact. It's distinguished by an oversized lens crowned with manual focus and zoom rings. The roof of the projector offers some short-cut function keys, for source selection and menu, and it ships with a stubby remote control and convenient carry case.

Connectivity covers most current and legacy sources: there are two HDMI, component video, S-Video, phono AV and PC VGA. If you don't plan on using every input, they can be disabled individually in the menu. The model is compatible with Texas Instruments' 3D DLP Link system, as betrayed by the 3D sync DIN socket nested on the rear.

As is typical with this grade of projector, there's a 10W speaker onboard, supposedly bolstered by SRS sound processing. This monophonic klaxon is useful if you fancy a quick bigscreen gaming session, but you'll not want to listen to it long for movies or sports.

Setup includes two ISF calibration modes and extensive image management tools if you want to get your hands dirty, including RGB colour, saturation and gamma. The UI is simplistic and consists of just three tabs broken down into Image and Settings. It's not

the prettiest around, but responds quickly to commands.

The throw is generous and should suit most modest living rooms. At just over 3m it'll cast a 100in image. You can go larger if you pull back but you'll probably run out of wall before you max out the image.

The pictures the H1185HD creates prove deliciously punchy. The projector has a high rated brightness output of 2,500 Lumens and does a fair job of maintaining watchability in modest levels of ambient light, but in full blackout it really zings. Dynamic Contrast is rated at 10,000:1, provided by a reliable DLP DarkChip 3 device. As you'd expect of a single-chip DLP model, the H1185HD offers crisp 1080p definition, with juicy, sometimes over saturated colours courtesy of TI's BrilliantColor processor. The combined deep blacks and toy-shop hues of *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* look particularly ravishing. High-contrast content does lead to some DLP rainbow fringing (a foible of the tech), and this is particularly noticeable on monochrome fare such as Universal's remastered *Bride of Frankenstein*. Unsurprisingly, there's no high frame-rate image interpolation onboard, so motion resolution is limited.

Solid all-rounder

When it comes to value, the H1185HD is difficult to fault. It's easy to set up, yet versatile enough to be used in a sophisticated automated home theatre room, and crafts a sharp, colourful image. The rainbow effect means, though, that those susceptible are advised to audition before they buy ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Inexpensive Full HD single-chip DLP PJ

POSITION:

One tier up from the less bright but still Full HD H1180

PEERS:

Epson EH-TW490; BenQ W1300; Optoma HD30

HCC VERDICT

Vivitek H1185HD

→ £850 Approx → www.vivitek.eu

→ Tel: +31 20 655 0960

HIGHS: Sharp 1080p image; vibrant colour performance; polite Eco mode

LOWS: Some rainbow fringing evident in high contrast scenes; unsuitable sound system; design is a bit 'executive fan heater'

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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- Time Out

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- Chicago Reader



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With its half-kilowatt of bass power and active/passive dual driver array, **Adam Rayner** finds the new REL S5 to be deeply worthy. Literally...



REL MAKES SUPERB

active subwoofers in general and this one is so good, it is peer to at least one 15in model and other products nearly twice the price. In the S5, driver and amplifier engineering have created a new benchmark.

This £1,600 sub uses a massively solid box with a chunky 'feature' grille that is easy to remove, and four thick supports to hold it off the floor. Bars on the side help you lug it about – it weighs 31kg – and design ticks include a logo badge on the top plate in a metallic finish. A wireless model in glossy black or white only (I'd like a wood option), it has a small aerial socket and a flip switch on the back. When used with REL's Longbow transmitter (an

optional extra), it will pair and receive the bass signal as a composite of both high-level from the speaker feed and the low-level phono input. The S5 has direct-connection sockets on the back too, adjusted by crossover knob but separate gain controls for both high- and low-level

Sidebars help you move the S5 around your room during setup

inputs. You also get a 10m cable with a Speakon plug.

The 12in long-excursion front driver has a large surround and 550W of Class D amp to drive it. Underneath, floor-firing, is a thin 12in disc of high-tech carbon fibre, also on a roll suspension. This is passive and offers the S5 benefits over ported or sealed designs.

Now the time is here

Iron Man 3 on Blu-ray had its plastic wrapper broached, and screened for the first time since I saw it at the flicks. I connected the S5 via a Y lead to both my amp's phono stereo sockets, as well as using the Speakon plug fixed to the main outputs. It was very easy to setup and get a good result, yet you will no doubt tweak the gain levels for a movie or three initially.

The first and best thing immediately apparent of the S5 is the scale it gives to the whole multichannel soundfield. It will make all your speakers sound effortlessly larger and more dynamic, not just add low-end boom.

Of course, the spectacular effects you would want for this sort of spend do not disappoint. As it is sealed, it is tight and fast. And as it has a passive bass radiator, it can be explosive and drop like a stone to play real infrasonics. At the line, 'Do we need to worry about that?' Stark's house gets blown up. If you can hear/feel the heartbeat at the very end of this mayhem-filled sequence, then you may well have a REL.

This woofer can be seen to reach a limit but if you find it your home will likely be shaking with structure-borne bass as you do so. And, yes, it's hardly cheap, but I'd argue it offers fantastic value; as good as REL's previous Stentor but for a good chunk less. And if you need more, REL's Gibraltar range is for certifiable types, or castle owners.

A definite audition for serious cinema hedz with sizeable budgets ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x driven 12in front-firing massive excursion driver; 1 x down-firing 12in Passive Bass Radiator
ENCLOSURE: Sealed. Short feet hold the unit above the floor to pressurise the down-firing passive driver
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: -6dB at 21Hz
ON-BOARD POWER: 550W RMS, Generation II Class D power amplifier
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 444.5(w) x 455.5(h) x 551.5(d)mm
WEIGHT: 31.6kg
CONNECTIONS: Single phono for LFE input; stereo phonos for low-level input; Neutrik Speakon socket for high-level input. Aerial socket for reception of RF bass signal with optional Longbow wireless system



HCC VERDICT

REL S5

→ £1,600 Approx → www.rel.net
 → Tel: 01656 768 777

HIGHS: Literally awesome speed; huge low extension and adds massive scale with perfect grip; plenty of connective options
LOWS: No wood finishes available; the Longbow wireless system, included with REL's Habitat sub, is an extra here

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Premium 12in woofer with wireless option

POSITION: Top model in the new S series, priced above REL's T series

PEERS: Paradigm Studio Sub 12; MA GXW15

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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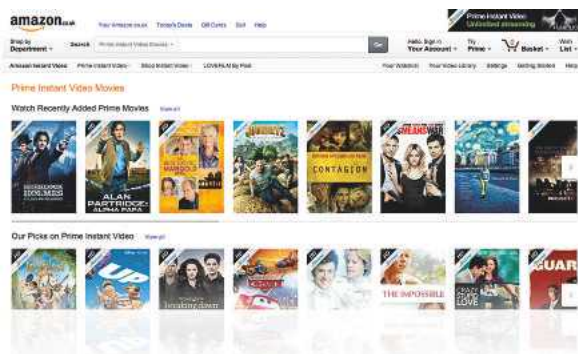
Amazon Instant Video not so amazing

Can Amazon's revamped VOD service topple sector hero Netflix? **Steve May** isn't convinced

JUST AS SAM Raimi begat Marc Webb, LoveFilm has evolved into Amazon Instant Video. This latest iteration of Amazon's non-contract streaming video service can be had for £5.99 (or packaged with Amazon's premium postal service Prime for £79). It's available on multiple platforms, including Smart TVs, mobile devices and consoles.

Amazon's proposition is similar to that from Netflix, albeit with key differences. Unlike its arch nemesis, Instant isn't inclusive. Take a wrong turn and you'll stray into pay-per-view territory, where movie titles smell fresher, but cost around £3.49 a pop.

Streaming video quality is good. On a fast fibre broadband connection, HD content pours in at a crisp 720p. You'll need a speed of 3.5Mbps/sec or better to wade in this stream. Higher-speed connectors also get Dolby Digital 5.1 where available; at lower bitrates, audio drops to stereo. A minimum



speed advisable for users would be 1.5Mbps/sec, although you'll get fuzz-o-vision down to 450 Kbits/sec. Unlike its key rival, Amazon servers helpfully check your connection speed before engaging the appropriate stream. This avoids the first minute or so of blurry footage experienced by Netflix users.

Unfortunately, the Amazon interface is an ergonomic mess. While Netflix is fun and engaging to browse (Kaleidescape on the

Amazon's servers check your connection speed before supplying the best-suited stream

cheap), Amazon is a jungle of low-res thumbnails; tiny ticks differentiate free-to-stream fare from PPV content. There's actually a lot of shared content with other VOD vendors, and exclusives seem thin on the ground. While Netflix has award-winners *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*, Amazon offers *Vikings* and *Alpha House*. It seems Amazon still

has some way to go before it can rival Netflix for content and user experience ■

HCC VERDICT

Amazon Instant Video → £5.99 per month

Overall ★★★★★

SONY MDR-HW700DS → Approx £450

Wireless 9.1 in the can

Sony's luxurious 'phones are the next best thing to a forest of floorstanders, says **Steve May**



The 'phones are supplied with an HDMI surround sound processor

THE PROSPECT OF high-performance wireless surround headphones should be a mouthwatering one for home cinema enthusiasts. After all, it's not always possible to run your AV system at full throttle, so the idea of multichannel private listening has great appeal.

The two-piece MDR-HW700DS comprises headphones and HDMI surround processor. The latter sports three HDMI inputs and one output, plus optical digital audio in/outputs and a pair of stereo phono inputs. Typically users will forgo the control buttons on the processor itself and run the system entirely via the headphones. A small knob on the bottom of the right-hand earpad calls up the menu system for the processor onscreen. The cans also offer input and DSP effect controls, plus a volume dial; mastering these takes a little time.

Delivering the 9.1-channel soundstage is proprietary Virtualphones Technology. This surround simulacrum adds two additional rear

channels and a pair of front heights to the standard 5.1 mix. Imaging is surprisingly accurate. Running the sound channel check on *The Expendables 2* Blu-ray, the headphones accurately placed all the channels in a 7.1 mix and made a good stab at recreating the Neo:X 11.1-channel option too. There's a real sense of scale and spaciousness to the soundstage.

Overall, these are a compelling alternative to a full-blown speaker experience. The headphones reach deep and transmission is interference free. Finally you don't have to compromise on volume or immersion when you want to crank it in the small hours! ■

HCC VERDICT

Sony MDR-HW700DS → £450

Overall ★★★★★

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Casting your net

You can use it to watch video from Netflix, BBC iPlayer, YouTube, BT Sport and more – but this media streamer currently feels like a work-in-progress, says **Grant Rennell**



Chromecast plugs directly into your TV's HDMI input

have more than one you can choose which one to 'cast' to). There's no remote control either (unlike Roku's stick) as the casting and controlling of the source is handled on the device you're using.

Get streaming

SD and HD video streamed from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and YouTube (with the exception of poor-quality clips) looked

decent enough on my 42in plasma TV and played smoothly, too. Bear in mind, however, that unlike tab casting, this was being streamed from the internet (using a 20Mbps connection) over our network to the Chromecast rather than via our Windows 7-equipped laptop. You can also stream from Google Play Movies & TV, Google Music, Red Bull TV, VEVO and Rdio.

As well as web pages and content including video, I was able to cast video, audio and image files stored on my laptop that could be played/displayed in Chrome. The maximum resolution available for casting video from a tab is 720p, with a high-bitrate 'Extreme' option. I experienced some occasional jerkiness when network-streaming video playing in Chrome on my laptop.

Other Chromecast-compatible apps are available offering features such as more advanced media streaming functionality (you can use Plex for example, including on iOS and Android devices). Notable drawbacks at present are that you can't stream video straight from the internet from 4oD, Demand 5 or ITV Player (though you can stream them using the tab casting feature) and the lack of support for other web browsers.

It's early days, of course, and as more features are introduced and app support grows the low price tag (it's nearly £20 cheaper than the Roku Streaming Stick) should make Chromecast a more appealing media streaming solution. It's worth keeping an eye on, then, rather than a 'must-buy' ■

SPECIFICATIONS

APP SUPPORT: Includes BBC iPlayer, Netflix, YouTube, BT Sport, Google Music, Google Movies & TV and Red Bull TV

CONNECTIONS: HDMI; microUSB

DIMENSIONS: 72(w) x 35(h) x 12(d)mm

WEIGHT: 34g

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; media streaming with 1080p video and 5.1 surround audio support; stream content directly from supported online services; mobile device support with iOS and Apple apps available; casting of content from Chrome web browser using computers over a network; compatible with Windows 7 or later, Chrome OS, Mac OS X 10.7 or later, iOS 6 or later and Android 2.3 or later

CONSIDERING HOW SMART many TVs are these days, plug-in media players/streamers may seem surplus to requirements for many, but if yours needs 'smartening up' there's a new contender in town. Taking on similar products like Apple's Apple TV and the Roku Streaming Stick, Chromecast can be used to watch content from Netflix, YouTube, BBC iPlayer, BT Sport (if you have a subscription), and other sources, on your TV.

For this you need a computer (a Windows PC, Chromebook or Mac) running Google's Chrome web browser, or an iOS or Android device equipped with a free Chromecast app, plus the requisite (if supported) app for what you want to stream. All all of which must be connected to the same Wi-Fi network as the Chromecast. You can also use it to 'cast' what's being displayed in a tab in Chrome on your computer to your TV.

The Chromecast takes the form of a dongle

with built-in Wi-Fi, which plugs into an HDMI port on your TV. It can be powered using the mains adapter provided or, more simply, via a USB port on your TV. There's no manual in the box, but it's easy enough to set up and you can give it a name if you want (if you

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Media streaming 'stick'

POSITION: Google's first AV hardware product

PEERS: Roku Streaming Stick; Apple TV; Now TV box

HCC VERDICT

Google Chromecast

→ £30 Approx → Supplier: www.pcworld.co.uk
→ Tel: 0844 561 0000

HIGHS: Stream BBC iPlayer, Netflix and more to your TV; easy to set up; multimedia streaming ability

LOWS: Compatible device required to stream; limited app support at present; tab casting only works with Chrome

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Bluetooth speakers

Gordon Kelly wants a high-performance speaker that will connect wirelessly to his army of Smart devices and be equally happy in both office and garden. Will one of this quartet suffice?

A FEW YEARS ago Bluetooth was a dirty word in the audio market. Apple AirPlay and Wi-Fi Direct offered higher quality, lossless, wire-free streaming and Bluetooth was reserved for budget speakers that looked bad and sounded worse. How times change.

Bluetooth has upped its game. While AirPlay and Wi-Fi Direct have proved complex, expensive to licence and heavy on battery drain, Bluetooth has become more power-efficient and lifted its audio quality significantly. The A2DP profile brought stereo streaming and better low-frequency response and apt-X has upped data to a level where

even many audio connoisseurs struggle to tell it apart from lossless standards.

With Bluetooth showing its teeth (and remaining remarkably cheap to licence and

'Bluetooth has upped its game, becoming more power efficient and lifting its audio quality significantly'

easy to use) even high-end speaker manufacturers are flocking to it in droves. The household names in this group test highlight this and each has added their own flourishes such as NFC to pair devices simply by touch, and hands-free calling.

Each speaker here was subjected to an array of music styles and run continuously at different volumes for a real-world battery test. The bass of AWOLNATION, percussion of Cat Power, acoustics of Gotye and Nirvana unplugged, electronics of Arcade Fire, pop sensibilities of Naked and The Famous, plus some Bach, formed the core of the test tunes.

Approx £170 → www.bose.co.uk

Bose SoundLink Mini

This compact model focuses on a warm, seductive sound

WHEREAS RIVAL BRANDS have endowed their offerings with bonus features, Bose has gone for the exact opposite approach. Its debut Bluetooth speaker has a laser-like focus: no hands-free calling, no NFC, no apt-X. There's Bluetooth 2.1 with A2DP, 3.5mm auxiliary output, volume controls and mute and power buttons. This is a no-frills speaker.

But it remains a premium device. The SoundLink Mini's design is minimalist but its gentle curves appeal as does its compact size (180 x 58 x 51mm), first-rate build quality and durable metal chassis. A nice touch is that Bose ships the speaker with a charging cradle which means, while it can be charged directly, it can also simply be sat on its dock.

Bose is typically secretive about its audio tech specs, beyond revealing the SoundLink Mini packs two tweeters and dual bass radiators. Its deceptively heavy 700g heft

bodes well, however, and this is reflected in the sound, which is wonderfully deep and rich. In fact, the Mini is noticeably louder than the much bigger Loewe Speaker 2GO (tested over the page). Put all four speakers in this test together and the Mini has easily the most crowd-pleasing sound signature.

In need of nuance

But cracks do emerge. The SoundLink Mini's performance is, to a certain extent, lacking in clarity. The luxurious electronic arrangements of Arcade Fire's *Reflektor* are a little muddled, and if you enjoy classical music you'll find this speaker does more justice to the bass section

than the strings. Battery life is also disappointing. Bose claims seven hours yet my tests saw it fall just shy of six hours, making it a little short for all-day listening. That said, the pricing is surprisingly competitive compared to its roundup challengers and, despite a lack of features, I can't see many not being seduced by its warm, reassuring tones.



HCC VERDICT

Bose SoundLink Mini → £170

Overall ★★★★★

Geneva Sound Model XS DAB+

Is there more here than clever design and useful features?



WHILE THE BOSE SoundLink Mini leans toward a bass-heavy performance, Geneva Sound has always prided its products on detail and clarity, and the Model XS sticks to these principles while throwing in both style flourishes and features galore.

Its design is ingenious – the speaker and its hard case are inseparable, with the case acting as a protector when not in use and as a stand to keep the XS angled for better sound projection when its fired up. It is also the only speaker here to feature a removable battery so you can purchase spares. It's practical and hardwearing.

HCC VERDICT

Geneva Sound Model XS DAB+ → £220

Overall ★★★★★

Dabbling with DAB

Other features include a useful DAB+ digital radio tuner. There is a digital clock display and alarm as well, so it is a compelling travelling companion. There's no hands-free calling option, though, which may annoy the wannabe Gordon Gekkos out there.

Unfortunately these positives are compromised by a lacklustre audio performance. The 2x 3W tweeters and 6W subwoofer simply can't keep pace with the rivals. Bass reproduction feels underpowered and it's the quietest of the four on test.

This is a shame because give the XS acoustic material and it sounds superb. Nirvana's famous unplugged sessions in New York sound great, delivering the full rasp of Kurt Cobain's strained vocals. Yet start up AWOLNATION's *Sail* and it flounders. Meanwhile, the already meagre five-hour rated battery lasted just a little over four hours.

A £220 ticket also heavily counts against the XS because it doesn't sound like a speaker in this price bracket. It is perhaps the most practical, portable and usefully featured model here and will please the frequent traveller, but for those wanting something powerful to take to the park on a sunny day, or simply park on a bedside table, it isn't the answer.

Approx £170 → www.harmankardon.co.uk

Harman/Kardon Esquire

This offers battery staying power and a love of going loud

Out of the box, the Harman/Kardon Esquire is unassuming, with a square design that lacks the compactness of the SoundLink Mini and the trickery of the Model XS. But it is wholly practical, and the rock-solid aluminium chassis and leather back add a touch of luxury. Measuring 147mm wide/high and 46.5mm deep, and weighing 700g, it remains portable.

Unlike the other Bluetooth speakers auditioned which use barrel chargers, the Esquire employs microUSB like every (non-Apple) gadget you own. It also has a useful five-dot battery indicator, whereas the rest require either button combinations to speak their charge level or only warn you when they are low. It offers crystal clear hands-free calling and NFC device pairing. Simple button controls adorn the top surface.

More importantly, the Esquire's 2x 10W tweeters and bass radiators punch well above their weight. Remarkably, this is the loudest speaker on test by some margin, making it

great for uncritical outdoor use. It does share the Geneva Sound Model XS's interest in mid- and high-range clarity and detail, lapping up both the pop of Naked and The Famous' *Young Blood* and driving treble of Cat Power's *He War*. Yet bass is still satisfying – not quite as rich as the Bose SoundLink Mini but able to handle AWOLNATION's *Sail* with aplomb.

Apt-X? Pah

There are a couple of niggles, though. Harmon/Kardon has pulled the apt-X support which is featured in its larger Onyx home speaker, and there's no full-size USB port for charging a device. And the rather cheap carry case feels like an afterthought.

But the Esquire finishes on a high. It hit its 10-hour claimed battery life, putting it noticeably ahead of its rivals in the longevity stakes, and at a new price of £170 (down from an original £230) it is the joint cheapest speaker here.



HCC VERDICT

Harman/Kardon Esquire → £170

Overall ★★★★★

Loewe Speaker 2GO

The German brand's premium speaker pushes the term 'portable'...



WHEN LOEWE

RELEASED a portable Bluetooth speaker it was the final market validation the standard needed. The Speaker 2GO is typical of the brand. From the outset it is determined to make an impression – at 240mm wide and 1.3kg it is by far the

biggest and heaviest speaker

on test here. In fact I'd say its dimensions are pushing what most would like to carry around.

Needless to say Loewe counters this with premium build materials and the Speaker 2GO is wonderfully put together. Its looks are somewhat love/hate, though, and I'm not a big fan of its boxy design and mirrored top/sides.

Less contentious is the Speaker 2GO's audio performance. Loewe has nailed the low-frequency response often lacking in portable designs and it is notably warm and crowd-

pleasing on AWOLNATION's anthemic *Sail*. It isn't all smooth sailing though – detail in higher frequencies isn't as impressive and this is apparent in the guitar plucking on Gotye's *Someone I used to Know*. There also isn't as much sound dispersion as I'd like for a speaker claiming a considerable 40W, courtesy of two 10W tweeters and a 20W woofer. This is a shame as its support for apt-X means the Loewe has the wireless chops to provide better.

Loewe gets back in my good books via this speaker's practicality. There's NFC for device-pairing, hands-free calling with a superb echo-cancelling mic, an auxiliary out and a USB port for charging devices connected to it. The 2,500mAh battery will fully charge most smartphones and I found it lived up to its eight-hour claims on moderate to high volume.

Price predictably is a negative. £230 may be affordable for a Loewe product, but it is the most expensive speaker here and even that represents a £40 cut from its original RRP.

HCC VERDICT

Loewe Speaker 2GO → £230

Overall ★★★★★

Final standings

THIS QUARTET ILLUSTRATES perfectly the wide-ranging nature of the Bluetooth speaker market, with price points, technical specifications and additional features all varying. And our overall scores vary, too...

HOWEVER, EACH SPEAKER remains a high-quality device. Build materials are luxurious across the board and each model can claim to offer something that none of its rivals do. As such, which one appeals most to you will be a personal choice.

For us the Harman/Kardon Esquire just sneaks into top spot. This is due to its all-round audio performance, high volume output, long-lasting battery and convenient micro USB charging. It also matched the useful hands-free calling feature of the more expensive Loewe Speaker 2GO while being the joint-cheapest on test.

In second place is the Bose SoundLink Mini. Its lack of features will alienate some but its rich, warm audio is a crowd-pleaser and its

compactness and volume advantage over the hefty Speaker 2GO make up for the Loewe's greater functionality. And it matches the Harman/Kardon in value-for-money terms.

The Speaker 2GO is third due to its high price tag and relative lack of punch for something so big but its audio is satisfying, the hands-free option works brilliantly and we love its ability to charge other USB devices.

This means the Geneva Sound Model XS lies in fourth place. In this line-up this is far from a disgrace but its weak output and noticeable lack of bass is a problem. Were this improved in a future version, the XS's clever form factor, replaceable battery and useful DAB radio could see it challenging for top honours ■



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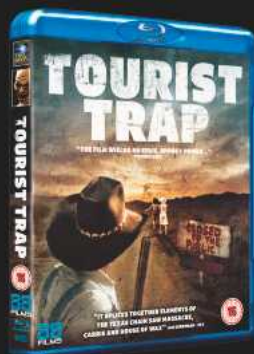
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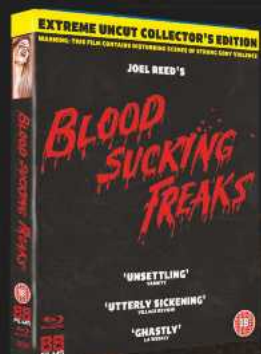


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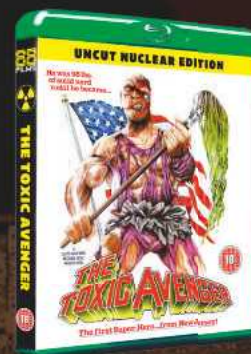
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DIGITAL COPY

Mark Craven worries that too much choice is complicating the AV buying process, and wonders if the philosophy of a swearsy TV chef could be worth investigating

EARLIER THIS WEEK I was slumped in front of my TV in the evening, browsing the EPG, and found myself watching an episode of *Gordon Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*. As usual, the fiery Scots chef was dealing with a hapless sap whose restaurant was losing more money in a week than most of us make in a year. And, as usual, one of the first things Gordon advised was to streamline the menu, knocking it down from its four-page anthology of culinary blandness to a simple selection of tasty goodies. A smart solution, I thought, knowing how annoying it can be to choose between meat and fish, let alone thirty variations of the two. And it's an idea that I humbly suggest could be employed by the AV industry.

The current trend amongst TV and AVR manufacturers (and, to a lesser extent, those who punt BD decks and speakers, too) seems to be to offer a massive range, packing various levels of features, and let the consumer try and work out what they want. Having dealt with frustrated friends demanding I tell them exactly which flatscreen they should buy – narrowing it from a dizzying choice of 30 to a single reassuring option – I know this doesn't always work.

There will be some buyers who are immune. Those with unfettered budgets can simply purchase the product at the top of the line and know they're getting everything possibly available. And there will be those who know exactly what they want of, say, an AV receiver, and will ignore anything that doesn't fit the bill. But for many it will be a tortuous journey, involving online research, calls to customer services and the pestering of any mates they have who happen to edit AV mags.

Does it have to be like this? Does Onkyo have to offer nine AV receivers all for under a grand? Does

LG's UK website need to feature 78 different TVs to buy? I assume the business analysts at these companies would say 'Yes, idiot' and point me in the direction of market research and accounts figures, and start waffling on about profit margins.

However, take a company like Apple. The Silicon Valley king has amassed enough cash to keep all the world's restaurants ticking over via a product strategy that favours the less is more approach. Want an iPad? You can choose from two sizes. This cuts out customer stress straight away – as evidence I will report I have never met an unhappy Apple fan.

Flatpacked flatscreens?

Unfortunately, I can't see the flatscreen manufacturers adopting Gordon Ramsay's philosophy and stripping their TV stables to only five models. But perhaps the AV industry could borrow some ideas from the world of automobiles, and offer basic products with the option to add on additional specifications. Let us choose whether we want twin tuners, or four HDMI inputs, or USB HDD recording, without having to also pay for the privilege of a 3D panel and Quad Core processing. Go a step further and they could sell us self-assembly flatpacked screens, complete with a glass-cutter to get the preferred screen size from a basic 60in sheet.

I doubt any of that will happen – especially the last part, obviously. We'll carry on reporting on obese product ranges, and consumers will carry on muddying through the selection process and moaning about it. People want a choice, after all. But if the level of choice stops someone from making a purchase at all – well, that's a problem, isn't it? ■

Is there such a thing as too much choice when it comes to AV? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Mark Craven watches a lot of cookery programmes, all while eating a pot of microwaved baked beans on three pieces of sliced bread





CAMEO ROLE

Following the announcement that BBC Three is to move online-only next year, **Adrian Justins** checks it out to see if it is worth saving – or if it even deserves a place on iPlayer

WHAT CAN YOU get for 40p these days? Not even a second-class stamp or a pint of milk. You can, however, get the BBC's seemingly countless array of TV and radio channels, websites and the iPlayer catchup service, for a day at least. Yet this wealth of content doesn't stop telly addicts from having a pop at the Beeb every now and then. We all have a stake in it, and therefore reserve the right to moan about anything it does – be it the vast staff salaries it hands out or its insistence on giving Michael McIntyre his own chat show.

Recently we were at it again. There was a hue and cry when the BBC announced it was banishing BBC Three from the EPG and sending it to a new home in iPlayer-land. The corporation has to cut £100 million from its budget and the part-time channel currently costs around £85 million to run (although it hasn't been said how much it will cost to run the channel exclusively online). But why cull BBC Three, rather than make cuts elsewhere? My receding hairline will tell you I'm not the channel's target market, but I thought I should check out the product by gorging on its menu of youth-orientated fodder. Things started badly, with a documentary following some teen parents around a grotty little home county town. Turning their noses up at social housing because they didn't like the wallpaper, the couple preferred to stay at home and scrounge off their gormless parents. I was quickly depressed that the Beeb had spent even one slither of my 40p on making this televisual void.

My mood lifted with *Free Speech*, a sort of *Question Time* for sixth formers in beanies, presented by a bearded hipster who took questions from the show's Facebook page (how 2014!), including one that called for the legalisation of medicinal cannabis. The show felt contemporary and relevant as a panel

of supposedly young, dynamic politicians and commentators failed to convince the audience that allowing cannabis would create a nation of heroin addicts. *Pramface*, meanwhile, was a surprisingly good drama about wayward youths finding their feet. The show could give Sky Atlantic's brilliant *Girls* a run for its money, albeit with less nudity.

But then it was *Snog, Marry, Avoid*. This bleak programme transformed two ungrateful oiks from spray-tanned Barbie-alikes to pretty young things. The problem is, even after their friends muttered something favourable but unintelligible about the improvements, they went back to looking like melting Lindt bunnies.

Time to pick and choose

A mixed bag, then, and while the BBC Three iPlayer migration will save money and allow the corporation to ramp up its online-only output (if you only use the iPlayer for watching TV you don't have to pay the licence fee) I don't see how it can continue producing all of its original BBC Three content just for an online channel. **The viewing landscape is certainly changing, but not as fast as you might imagine** – figures for 2012 released by Ofcom showed that 90 per cent of all TV viewing was done linearly in the traditional way. High-quality original (unbroadcast) productions form a tiny proportion of the shows available online because economically they don't add up. I suspect that's what will happen to BBC Three's iPlayer output. Good-quality shows will still find suitable broadcast outlets. We shouldn't fret too much about home county delinquents disappearing into cyberspace ■

*Is the BBC right to increase its iPlayer-only content?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Adrian Justins doesn't quibble about paying his licence fee – but is wondering when the Beeb will get around to filming its regional news shows in hi-def



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FILM FANATIC

It may be just one drop in a very large ocean, but the rediscovery of a lost British silent film gives **Anton van Beek** hope that there's still plenty out there to be found

TOWARDS THE END of 2013 the Library of Congress released a new study by film historian and archivist David Pierce, exploring the survival rate of silent films made in the United States between 1912 and 1929. It made for extremely bleak reading.

According to the report, of the 10,919 silent films known to have been produced in the US during that time, only 14 per cent (around 1,575 titles) exist in their entirety on the film format in which they were originally produced and distributed (e.g. 35mm). An additional 11 per cent exist only as full-length foreign versions or on smaller gauge film formats of lesser image quality (e.g. 16mm). That means that a whopping 75 per cent of films made in the US during this time are lost. No wonder the Library of Congress called the findings 'an alarming and irretrievable loss to our nation's cultural record.'

And this dire situation is replicated worldwide. The Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin estimates that **between 80 and 90 per cent of all silent films are missing, believed lost.**

While the vast majority of these flicks will probably never resurface, every now and again we get some good news – such as the announcement in early April of the discovery of a complete print of pioneering English filmmaker George Pearson's 1923 film *Love, Life and Laughter*. Prior to this, only one other complete Pearson film was known to exist, making the recovery of *Love...* particularly significant.

Pearson's 'lost British masterpiece' had featured in the BFI 75 Most Wanted, a list of the British Film Institute's most sought-after films, compiled as part of the organisation's 75th anniversary celebrations back in 2010. The recent rediscovery came about when staff at Amsterdam's EYE Film Institute Netherlands set about cataloguing a collection of

film cans that had belonged to the Cinema Theater De Vries in the small town of Hattem.

Buried treasures

The rediscovery of a print of Pearson's *Love, Life and Laughter* comes only four years after a haul of 75 rare silent films was uncovered in the New Zealand Film Archive – including the only known copy of *Upstream*, a late silent by John Ford. And we can't forget the celebrated recovery of missing scenes from Fritz Lang's 1927 sci-fi masterpiece *Metropolis* (albeit in 16mm), which turned up in the archive of a museum in Argentina some 80 years after the movie's debut. Who could possibly have predicted that by the end of 2010, fans would be enjoying a restored version of Lang's film featuring 25 minutes of newly-recovered footage?

Then, of course, there was the discovery of nine missing episodes of *Doctor Who* at a TV station in Nigeria last year, which has given Whovians the first chance to see the Patrick Troughton stories *The Enemy of the World* and *The Web of Fear* since they were first broadcast in the late '60s. As with lost films, the search for missing TV and radio shows continues around the world and still comes up trumps once in a while.

While much of this is driven by enthusiasts and experts scouring the globe, the news stories that accompany these discoveries will hopefully also make members of the public that little bit more vigilant. Who knows where a print of Hitchcock's missing silent film *The Mountain Eagle* might be hiding right now? Maybe it's in one of those rusty old film cans stashed away at the back of your attic, next to the Betamax player... ■

Which missing film and TV treasures are you hoping turn up? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek has created his own versions of the missing *Doctor Who* episodes using homemade action figures. He really doesn't get out very much....



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Playing the waiting game

I was a subscriber to Blockbuster by post – this was the way I watched my Blu-rays, three or four a month. Since its death I have been without the latest BD releases. I have tried Sky Movies but the quality of their transmissions varies too much. Pay-per-view is too expensive. Netflix, barring the brilliant 1080p streams of *Breaking Bad*, is a waste of money.

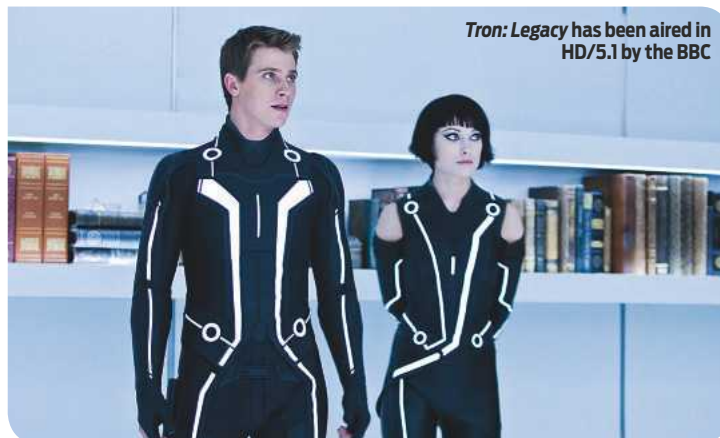
So I have now tried and love the 'patience route' – films shown on free-to-air. Film 4 screenings are excellent, in HD mostly with Dolby Digital soundtracks. Likewise the BBC – a recent screening of *Tron: Legacy* in HD and 5.1 was superb. Also C5 and C4 – HD showings are mostly in

5.1 and generally seem better quality than Sky. Also, films seem to be popping up a mere two years after release, and, when recorded on my Virgin Media TiVo, ads are a minor inconvenience.

Okay this is not by any means perfect. I miss my BDs and the sound codecs, but for anyone in the same boat as me it's a brilliant stop gap until streaming gets its act together.

Dave, Herts

Mark Craven replies: Old school – I like it! I suppose it's easy for us Blu-ray obsessives to forget there's plenty of content available via the traditional free-to-air route, as long as seeing films as fresh as possible isn't a concern. In fact,



Tron: Legacy has been aired in HD/5.1 by the BBC

I frequently find myself watching HD movies via the likes of Film 4 and BBC HD – my only problem is that I usually stumble across them when they're halfway through!

Regarding getting BDs by post – have you considered a LoveFilm subscription? The long-running rental company has now been acquired by Amazon, but the service still exists as part of

★ STAR LETTER...

Break out the orchestra for audio auditions!

I was pleased to read of your surprise that Naim did not use music that seriously tested the Statement/Focal combo at the Bristol Show. In the presentation I attended, only the last pop piece slammed out scary, metallic, bass thumps from the Grande Utopias' massive woofers, whereas everything else was the typical small-ensemble, 'plink-plonk-warble' pop/jazz that bedevils most Bristol demos. Naim's response about this being what the Chinese like to hear may be relevant for a Shanghai show but not for Bristol.

Linked to this, my major gripe at the show has always been the lack of largescale classical music in demonstrations. 'Plink-plonk-warble' is okay for gauging imaging and small-scale reality but a full orchestral climax is the

ultimate test of any system: it must convince in terms of dynamics, the widest pitch-range and having six hundred and fifty players and singers (for Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*) as a reality at the end of the room.

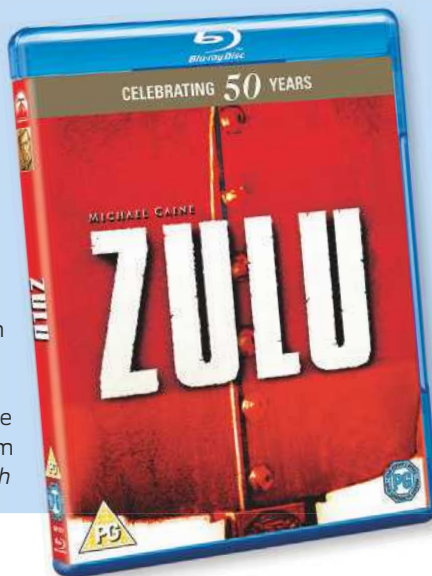
I know orchestral music can be problematic (although not impossible) in small rooms, or with small speakers, but even KEF, in a large space, only used a few moments of *The Four Seasons*; hardly a major workout for its high-end Blade speakers. The same applies to Naim's use of an undemanding John Rutter choral piece.

There is, I suspect, a fear that classical music will scare people away but *Sunrise* from Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach*

Zarathustra (probably the most well-known piece of classical music in the world: it even occurs in *Toy Story 2* and *Wall-E*) shouldn't do this, and the organ pedal and full-organ/orchestra totally tests what a system

can do with pitch and dynamics in the space of two minutes. Copland's well known *Fanfare for the Common Man* does the same for scale and bass drum wallop. And then there's orchestral film music: the opening of *Star Wars* or anything from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy for instance. There are so many well-known soundtracks that would draw people in. Imagine any of those on the Statement/Focal combo!

As ever, I took a CD to the show because near the end, when the crowds have thinned out, I can usually get a classical disc played. Appropriately, in the REL subwoofer room, we listened to a track of organ music that fully demonstrates a system's ability to produce a 32ft organ pipe's subterranean rumble, especially quietly. The



its Instant Video platform. Now called LoveFilm by Post, it costs £7.99 per month (or £6.99 if you are an Amazon Prime account holder) and a browse of the catalogue shows a healthy amount of new releases. It allows two discs to be sent out at a time.

Game of Moans

I recently bought a Now TV box – mainly so I could watch *Game of Thrones* (as I don't have Sky). The problem is, when the first episode of the new series was broadcast, it crashed Sky's network. The message boards were furious! All quite funny in a way, apart from the poor sods paying to watch live sport – I was able to see *GoT* on catchup later. Anyway, talk about incompetence as pretty much everyone who's signed up recently for Now TV has done so for this – you think they'd have prepared for it.

John Asgill, via email

Mark Craven replies: The Season Four opener of *Game of Thrones* was broadcast on Sky at 2am on April 7 (the odd time because it was a simulcast with the US premiere) but, as you say, non-Sky dish owners could grab



Game of Thrones: causing a stir on Now TV

the latest slice of fantasy TV via the Now TV platform later in the day. For one reason or another – most likely the sheer weight of demand – Now TV stopped working (temporarily, we understand), with the company issuing the following statement: 'We're aware of a number of reports of Now TV not working this evening. You might

experience slow loading times or error messages which stop you from watching content.' You should have been contacted since with the offer of a month's free subscription.

For streaming services, this isn't an isolated incident. In the US, similar platform HBO Go also suffered a crash when *Game of Thrones* fans logged on. And in March, the series finale of *True Detective* caused another HBO Go no-go.

So what does this mean for a potential streaming future? As you suggest, you might think IPTV platforms were prepared for large volumes of traffic, but it would appear that the success of these big-budget shows – and the desire of fans to see them 'live' so as to avoid the spoilers that are rapidly put out on social media – has caught them short. Investment in infrastructure is probably needed!

Worried about colour

Hope you can help – I'm looking at buying a new 65in TV for a cinema room. I would like to get a 2014 Samsung 4K TV because they offer some future-proofing with the One Connect box.

Yet I have seen something about wider colour gamut not being possible with these 4K panels and this may be part of the new Ultra HD/4K Blu-ray spec

– should I be concerned?

Richard, via email

John Archer replies: You're right to think that the One Connect box with a Samsung UHD TV is a really worthwhile feature in these uncertain times. The new box you can now add to last year's Samsung UHD models already brings new functionality to those older TVs – including the HDMI 2.0 connection standard so essential to UHD playback.

It's also not surprising that you're concerned about the colour space of UHD TVs, as this – together with frame rates – is an area of rampant speculation and 'wishlisting' where UHD is concerned. So rife is this speculation that we're already hearing rumours about the need for a new HDMI standard in a couple of years time.

However, thankfully there are some pretty straightforward facts we can deal in that will hopefully put your mind at ease. The main one is that the HDMI 2.0 standard is now set (and actually I don't personally see this changing for a few years, especially as it's what the 4K Blu-ray developers are working with). And this standard contains some key provisions relevant to your colour concerns.

The most important fact about it is that it supports data >

only problem was REL's bizarre decision to use tubby-sounding main speakers which compromised the overall quality.

Of course, there is also a wealth of multichannel orchestral music, opera and ballet on Blu-ray and TV to explore.

Is this something I could persuade HCC to investigate and nudge manufacturers towards for shows?

John Oakley, via email

Mark Craven replies: Glad you enjoyed the show, John, and were able to play your own discs. We always try to do this too, as there is a limit to how many times you can sit through the *The Dark Knight's* Bat-pod chase.

I totally agree that largescale classical music pieces would make great additions to the

typical show repertoire of 'detail-first' jazz compositions. To your informative list I would suggest adding Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, and not only because of the climactic cannon-fire.

But, as you say, perhaps film scores would be even better? Who doesn't love John Williams' *Superman* theme?

And in defence of Naim, and other brands at the Bristol Show, I do appreciate that there are logistical reasons that stop everyone whacking their amps up to 11.

Star letter-writer John Oakley wins a copy of the *Zulu: 50th Anniversary Edition* Blu-ray, which is available to buy on May 5 from Paramount Home Media Distribution.

bit rates of up to 18Gbps. This might sound like quite a lot, but when you consider that delivering the full DCI colour range would require between 30 and 40Gbps, you'll see that it's actually pretty limiting where colour information is concerned.

Naturally it's possible with the 18Gbps bandwidth to deliver a fuller colour range than you currently get with Blu-rays. But only to a point – a point whereby you can enjoy 4:4:4, 8-bit colour sampling at up to 60fps.

The advantages of 4:4:4 chroma sampling were seen last year on the first UHD TV with full HDMI 2.0 support, the Panasonic L65WT600. And this year HDMI 2.0 will be supported by almost all new UHD TVs from the main established brands – including Samsung. So the new Samsung TVs will give you the maximum colour bandwidth at high frame rates currently supported by the latest connection technologies – and these would seem likely to be what a 4K BD spec will be



Samsung's first-gen 4K TVs can be upgraded via external connections

based on. Panasonic is launching a new TV range later in the year, the AX900 series, that claims to be able to get close to delivering the full DCI colour specification. But this is delivered by the panel, and doesn't alter what can be received via its HDMI 2.0 ports due to those ports' bandwidth limitations. Only when or if a successor to HDMI 2.0 is launched might we expect to see revolutionary new developments in colour (and even higher frame

rate) terms to go with the surge in resolution offered by 4K.

Procella – not American!

I am a new subscriber to *HCC* and just received the May issue. Great magazine – keep it up!

On page 38 you mention a home cinema with some great electronics and you mention that much of it is 'from across The Pond, including speakers...'

I know that Procella has a big division in the US but to call it an

American company is not quite correct in my opinion.

According to Procella Audio's own website and its Facebook page most models are designed in Sweden and the factory is also located in Sweden.

I believe that Swedish home cinema enthusiasts would be sad to have this awesome company labelled as American.

If I have misunderstood something I do apologize in advance.

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



12 Years a Slave

Director Steve McQueen's critically-acclaimed film adaptation of Solomon Northup's memoir can be yours to own when it is released to buy on DVD and Blu-ray from May 12, and

thanks to EntertainmentOne we've got five copies of the Blu-ray up for grabs...

Question:

Which Michael has starred in all three of Steve McQueen's feature films?

Answer:

A) Michael Fassbender B) Michael C. Hall C) Michael Palin

Email your answer with '12 Years' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell

The final instalment in Hammer's legendary series of Frankenstein films is now available to buy on DVD and Blu-ray. To celebrate the release Icon

Home Entertainment has given us five copies of the Blu-ray to give away...

Question:

Who wrote the original novel *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus*?

Answer:

A) Robert Louis Stevenson B) Mary Shelley C) Bram Stoker

Email your answer with 'Monster from Hell' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



The Wolf of Wall Street

Leonardo DiCaprio stars in this award-winning look at the excessive side of the American dream directed by Martin Scorsese. The film is available to buy on Blu-ray and DVD from

May 19, and thanks to Universal Pictures (UK) we have five Blu-rays to give away...

Question:

Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio also worked together on which of the following?

Answer:

A) Gangs of New York B) New York Stories C) New York, New York

Email your answer with 'Wolf of Wall Street' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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PROA5603 3m £19.39	PROA5605 5m £20.42

Marius Pedersen, France
(Former resident of Sweden)

Mark Craven replies: No need to apologise Marius – it's us that owe Procella Audio a grovelling apology, because the company is, indeed, Swedish (and formed by two DTS employees looking to create speakers that would serve as the reference system for the audio company's London HQ). We must have been having one of our off days to label it American.

'Hi-fi' should be the ideal

I have been given a couple of old copies of your magazine by a friend who regularly purchases it. I read with horror in *HCC* #223 the following statement:

'The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVDs through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent two-channel hi-fi amp...'

What seems to be inferred there is that if you are not listening to music or music DVDs through your AV amp then its quality isn't as important and a lot of AV amps are not 'hi-fi' quality. Would I be correct in that assumption?

Procella: the high-end speaker brand from Sweden. And don't forget that



As a hi-fi 'nut' more than anything else, sound quality from any source is of utmost concern to me and I also assumed this would be the case of all AV enthusiasts and even more so of AV journalists.

As far as I am concerned the quality of the AV amp should be as good as a 'hi-fi' amp. The quality of the loudspeakers should also be on a par with 'hi-fi' ones, and the quality of the audio available now on all new releases (and a lot re-mastered re-issues) is exceptionally good.

So to say that a 'hi-fi' quality AV amp should only be a true consideration if listening to music is absurd. Any AV amp to be considered in any AV setup should be able to deliver 'hi-fi' quality sound at all times even if 'just' watching a film.

J. Crompton, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: The horror, the horror, to coin a line from *Apocalypse Now*. Well, an undisputed blood bath it might not be but, pound for pound, we can categorically say that AV amps do not sound as good with stereo music as dedicated two-channel hi-fi amps. It's not that AV amplifiers set out to offer second-rate two-channel sound, far from it, but it is simply not their main operational priority.

If we pick an amplifier budget of, say, £500, that will get you a very good and potentially exceptional two-channel hi-fi amp. This will have a chassis, a two-channel preamplifier stage and two power amps. Each component will be chosen to get

the most detail and resolution from your two-channel music. It is a dedicated tool for the job.

If we spend that £500 on an AVR, as every right-minded *HCC* reader should, then that money gets you a chassis, a host of audio processing for several incarnations of Dolby, DTS, DSX etc, video processing, upscaling and analogue to HDMI conversion, a room EQ system, a complex pre-amplifier with bass management and seven channels of analogue power amplification. Clearly the relative component quality of the pre-amp and power amplifier stages in the AVR are not going to be in the same ball park, let alone the same league, as the £500 stereo amp. And the hi-fi amp will (or at least should) sound better with stereo music.

Moreover, your AV amplifier is trying to recreate a delicate string symphony for your aural pleasure when there is a massive industrial process going on right beside it, and sharing a power supply. Digital processing is notoriously good at upsetting the delicacy and communication of nearby analogue circuits. Just stick your mobile phone near a microphone for a demonstration.

It is, however, eminently possible to design a comprehensively featured AV amplifier that also excels with two-channel stereo music – it's just not cheap. In sheer amplifier channels alone an AV amp would have to cost several times that of a hi-fi amplifier to offer the same component quality. It then needs to offer outstanding power supplies and excellent shielding

Sony's STR-DA5800ES has a lot more to do than just two-channel music

to ensure all the high-speed DSP does not affect the fine detail and nuances of the analogue circuits for both stereo and multichannel sound.

So panic ye not, AVRs can be very capable music performers but you will have to give the plastic a good flexing to achieve stereo music results comparable to a dedicated hi-fi model. Exactly the same is true of loudspeakers. Companies don't set out to create specific hi-fi or AV loudspeakers, they simply create a speaker that performs its very best at the given price point. The trouble is, with stereo music you need only need two passive loudspeakers and with AV you need at least five and an active subwoofer...

As a rough guide, and running the risk of being lynched, I would say the AV-to-hi-fi performance ratio with source, amp and speakers is around four or five to one. To get the same sound quality with two-channel music as a £500 stereo amp, expect to be looking at AV receivers in the £2,000-£2,500 price range ■

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New kid on the bass block

Launched this year at CES 2014, the PB-2000 marries a bespoke 12in driver to a freshly-engineered 500W (continuous) Sledge DSP amplifier, both designed to be perfect partners. For the lightweight aluminium driver, SVS employed a durable long-throw rubber surround, FEA-optimised motor and dual high-grade ferrite magnets, before subjecting it to rigorous real-world testing to see if it cut the movie mustard. The power plant, meanwhile, uses sophisticated DSP to fine-tune volume, phase and gain controls and ensure an optimal performance with both film and music material.

The PB-2000 is the bigger brother to the Best Buy-awarded SB-2000 reviewed in the previous issue of *HCC*. A key difference is that the PB-2000 is a ported design, and

therefore capable of dropping down to a subsonic 17Hz and offering even greater levels of chest-thumping slam and impact. Like its sibling, it features a solid, robust cabinet with smart black grain finish to blend into any cinema room, and a black metal protective grille.

On sale now for £750, we have one SVS PB-2000 to give away. So what are you waiting for?

Question:

Steve Harris plays bass guitar for which British band?

Answer:

- A) Iron Maiden B) The Rolling Stones C) Take That**

Email your answer, plus your name and full address, to: Competitions@homecinemachoice.com – with 'SVS' as the subject



The PB-2000 features a custom-designed 12in driver and advanced Sledge DSP amp

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Stateside cinema

Martin Dew's AV setup keeps him busy in Los Angeles when he's not making movies...



Introduce yourself...

I'm Martin Dew, aged 48.

What's your occupation?

Nearly four years ago, I decided to return to the acting profession, having trained at The Guildford School of Acting in the 1980s. I have been lucky enough to get cast in small supporting roles in films like *War Horse* and *The Master* and TV shows such as *Mad Men* and *Conan*. I also read audio books for Amazon and regularly appear with Will Ferrell's online comedy troupe *Funny or Die*.

For many years, I held down perfectly sensible jobs as a sales and marketing executive with Lucasfilm THX and subsequently NEC Digital Cinema, and now I occasionally consult on home cinema projects for an IT company in Los Angeles.

So you've been a home cinema fan for a long time then?

Ever since my parents bought me an Austrian-

made Eumig Super 8mm sound projector in Henley-on-Thames when I was 11!

Putting on a movie show has always been my favourite hobby. In the early 1990s, I bought a Panasonic NV-F65 Hi-Fi Stereo VHS recorder (for £500), quickly followed by an early Yamaha DSP add-on processor. Inside that beautiful brushed aluminium box was, quite literally, what must have been the most amazing revelation for any budding AV-holic ever: Dolby Surround Pro-Logic. Getting surround sound from a two-channel source seemed nothing short of magic in those days and I feel sorry for anyone young enough not to have lived through that amazing transition! And thus upgrade-itis took hold.

What kit do you have in your current system?

My 2008, almost-future-proof processor is an Integra DTC-9.8. Its HDMI 1.3 architecture suits me as 3D was never on my checklist. Images are provided by a Panasonic DMP-BDT220



Custom-made masking panels ensure both 1.85:1 and 2.35:1 movies get the best treatment possible



HCC reader Martin Dew has been employed on both sides of the cinematic fence – before returning to acting he worked for Lucasfilm THX and NEC Digital Cinema

An Epson 6010UB projector handles video duties



and a Toshiba HD-XA2 HD DVD player and, at the end of the video chain, an Epson 6010UB projector (the EH-TW9000, I believe, on your side of The Pond).

Power amplifiers are a Parasound HCA-2003 for the LCR and a Parasound HCA-1205 for the surrounds, both of which are cooled by Niles and Elan fans respectively. Speakers comprise a complete M&K 150 THX system with two subwoofers (in-phase, Y-connected mono), LCR satellites and four dipole/tripole surrounds. The screen is an Elite Screens 1.1 gain 2.35:1 fixed-frame model. Finally, I have a Darbee 5000 for subtle image processing duties placed between the pre-amp and PJ, and I fashioned my own velvet side-masking panels for constant height presentation.

There's an HD DVD player in there! Do you still use it?

Yes! My plan last year was to do away with HD DVD completely and possibly keep my HD-A2 1080i player packed away for posterity. However, during that decision-making process, I started to conduct non-scientific A/B comparisons on a few titles that were available on both HD DVD and BD formats. I found that some of the HD DVD studio releases were significantly more faithful transfers than their BD equivalents. The *Apollo 13* Blu-ray, for example, exhibited a much colder, bluer palette than the appreciably warmer, natural-looking and more detailed HD DVD release, so I quickly sought out a 1080p HD-XA2 from

'I was lucky to have received my M&K 150 system from Ken Kreisel himself – great speakers go on forever'

a seller on Craigslist and boxed up my lower-res HD-A2. I also think that the HD DVD user interface is far more pleasing, so I decided that my two retro players were keepers.

Roughly how much have you spent on your setup?

Probably in the region of \$10,000 over the past 12 years or so, but I was very lucky to have received my M&K 150 system courtesy of Ken Kreisel himself back in the days when I worked in marketing for Lucasfilm. That would have set me back a further \$5K. Great speakers just seem to go on forever.

What's next on your equipment wish list?

Black velour panels for the ceiling to absorb screen reflections. My 1.1 gain screen is overkill with my light beacon Epson projector, even set to eco mode. While the contrast is spectacular in dark scenes, there is a compromise in brighter scenes, so I intend to keep experimenting with that. Also, with the next-gen sound systems like Dolby Atmos and

Barco Auro gaining traction, I would love to get a domestic pre-amp that could handle one of them.

What's your favourite bit of kit?

That changes all the time, but currently it has to be my Parasound HCA-2003. With 300W per channel into my 4 ohm LCR speakers, it delivers in spades. It's an older amplifier, but I have no intention of upgrading. I used to underestimate the importance of great power amps in a pre/power combination and I fumbled around with some unremarkable Japanese slabs for years. My Parasounds not only married my satellites to my subs, they elevated my film and music collection out of the dull category and into the stratosphere.

What do friends and family think of the system?

They are always bowled over by the sound and picture quality. Many people experience home cinema in somewhat amorphous and muddled-sounding environments, both in stores and homes, but a carefully calibrated >

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself if you want) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic, and we'll be in touch.



Following some A/B comparisons, our AV-Holic decided to keep the Toshiba HD DVD deck in his kit rack

and tweaked system using the right equipment can sound magnificent. Likewise for picture, expectations at the outset are usually low for projected images because many have only a memory of, or reference to, a business projector at work or an aging CRT. How the landscape has changed in the last five years...

What's your favourite Blu-ray?

Ben-Hur (1959). The Warner Bros. 2.76:1 restoration is gorgeous. I prefer the aesthetic of films of the 50s, 60s and 70s and those captured on 35mm or 65mm film stock. Great Blu-ray transfers afford us the luxury of truly appreciating the texture and grain of a film print, qualities that were far less decipherable with standard-def DVDs. *Jaws*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *North by Northwest* and *Apocalypse Now* deserve honourable mentions.

What do you use to show off the system to your friends?

I have a movie night every Wednesday for a number of my film-obsessed friends, most of whom work in production, both behind and in front of the camera. I usually feed them a diet of Hitchcock, Spielberg, Lean and Kubrick, but occasionally I will break out a 7.1 earth-mover like *Star Trek Into Darkness*. As a stock demo, I use the complex and layered WWI sequences from *War Horse* and I'm currently identifying the best bits on *Gravity*.

Are you excited by 4K/Ultra HD?

Not yet. I'm waiting, perhaps in vain, for more good news. Video guru Joe Kane [producer of

the Digital Video Essentials disc] recently claimed that 4K product manufacturers will ideally need to employ 12-bit pixel depth (potentially with Display Port connectivity) as part of an official UHD standard, instead of the 8-bit staple over HDMI for hi-def content used now. Some time in the future, that would mean making available to consumers a home cinema colour gamut as wide as professional digital cinema (P3) or even beyond (rec.2020), and not settling on rec.709 with its inherent colour banding limitations. If an increase in resolution is all we're going to get for the time being, then we will need larger screens or displays at

conventional viewing distances to appreciate the heightened detail and, only then, when 2160p content becomes widely available.

So, I personally think 4K will remain an academic choice for the foreseeable future. Perhaps we enthusiasts should just continue to seek out display devices with the best price/performance ratio, irrespective of native resolution. (It wouldn't surprise me if two product generations from now we find that most displays are 2160p anyway, so that last suggestion may be of little consequence) ■

Martin rates Warner's Blu-ray restoration of *Ben-Hur* as 'gorgeous'



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SYSTEM SELECTOR!

In the first of a new series, we assemble **a 5.1 style system** that will look great and provide performance thrills without breaking the bank



1. Power and processing Marantz NR1604

The Marantz's slim-line chassis makes it a perfect fit for a home cinema setup that will be occupying a regular living space rather than a dedicated room, and its gently curved form and uncluttered fascia look classy, too. You can get the NR1604 in either black or silver finishes.

While not an out-and-out volume monster, its 7 x 50W amplification is potent enough for the demands here and its sound is thrilling with movie soundtracks and pleasantly poppy with music. Although our proposed system only needs a couple of them, the NR1604's six HDMI inputs provide space for further kit upgrades, and 4K passthrough could be useful at a later date. Something more immediately handy is its capabilities as an audio streamer – the Marantz provides 'net radio as well as FLAC, WMA and MP3 playback via a network or USB. No Wi-Fi here, unfortunately, so you'll need a router nearby.

Also consider: Pioneer VSX-S510

Another slim-chassis AVR with more than enough muscle for modest setups. It's a 6.1-channel (rather than 7.1) design, though. See p54 for more.

2. Player Samsung BD-F6500

Eminently affordable, Samsung's BD deck offers the key AV features required for movie fans (including 3D BD playback, which the even cheaper BD-F5500 ignores), in a neat, slender design. Connectivity is basic, running to nothing more than an HDMI output, optical audio output and a USB port on the front fascia, but that's all that's required. More importantly, the BD-F6500 offers wired and wireless network hookup, meaning you can get access to its content-rich Smart platform (including BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand 5).

Also consider: Panasonic DMR-BWT735

Not the sveltest of units, but this BD spinner adds Freeview HD recording via a 1TB HDD, and disc archiving, too.

3. Speakers KEF E305 5.1

Smallscale speakers with a style impact, KEF's latest 'eggs' are a perfect fit for a living room. The five identical satellite enclosures use the brand's UniQ driver array (1 x 4.25in midbass, 1 x 0.75in tweeter) and can be easily installed courtesy of their desktop stands – floorstands are an optional extra. The subwoofer, meanwhile, is a smart-looking affair with a downward-firing 8in bass driver and simplistic setup – although experimenting with the EQ bass boost feature (tailored to 50Hz) will help integrate it into your room.

Sound quality is superb for the price point, with a soundstage that's much bigger than you might expect from the cutesy cabinets. The high-quality tweeters work great to dig out intricate effects, and the blending of the sub and midbass drivers ensures plenty of bottom-end heft.

Also consider: QAcoustics Q7000i

Another £900 array, the QAcoustics look more grown up than the KEFs, but match them in performance – the sound here is smooth and detailed.



4. Display Sony KDL-42W653

This 2013-era LED TV is coming to the end of its shelf-life, but that means it doesn't cost as much as when it first launched. For less than £500, you're getting a very good all-round 42in flatscreen. Yes, the Sony Entertainment Network platform is a little uninspired in terms of design and content isn't first-rate, but the Samsung Blu-ray deck will shoulder a lot of that burden. And, yes, HDMI connectivity is limited to just two inputs, but the Marantz AVR makes up for this. What's important is that the KDL-42W653 offers a cracking 1080p picture, with its superb black level ability bolstered by a nuanced and boldly-saturated colour palette and smooth motion handling. And its styling is up to the standard set by the rest of our system's components, with a brilliantly thin bezel and minimalist stand.

Also consider: Sony KDL-50W829

More expensive (£900) but considerably larger, this 2014 Sony offers the retweaked UI and, again, excellent visuals.

5. Furniture Techlink Blade

A new system deserves a new AV stand, and this £270 unit has the design chops we're after (especially in the black finish – wood is also available). The sleek aluminium legs and MDF cabinet are capable of supporting 50kg loads, and TVs up to 55in will sit easily on its top. The drop-down glass door gives access to twin shelves for AV components and shouldn't block an IR signal – the Blade also has a pair of draws for squirrelling away the weekend's BD discs. A vent in the rear allows cable spaghetti to be funnelled away.



'The Marantz's slim-line chassis makes it an ideal fit for a cinema setup that will be occupying a regular living space'

Also consider: IKEA Lack TV bench

Save yourself a few quid with this low-slung £45 TV unit – it's basic, but has space on its sole shelf for a BD deck and AVR.

AND ADD THESE...

Grab these accessories for a simple system boost

Marantz RX-101



While the AV receiver is happy pulling music files off a NAS or USB hard drive, it only offers Bluetooth streaming via this £100 adaptor, which connects to the rear-mounted MX-Port.

KEF E series floorstands



Ensure the soundfield created by KEF's 'eggs' targets your listening

position with these optional floorstands, available for £150 per pair.

Devolo DLAN 500 Wi-Fi



If your router isn't within short distance of your kit rack, use this starter pack of Powerline adaptors to provide a wall-mounted Ethernet socket, sucking data over your mains. The plugs also provide a Wi-Fi boost.

NEXT ISSUE...

ENTRY-LEVEL PROJECTOR SETUP: Taking Optoma's excellent HD30 DLP projector as our starting point, we put together a bigscreen Full HD/5.1 surround system with a side talent in gaming...

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street.
01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street.
01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street.
01603 627134
www.martinhifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street.
01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road.
01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street.
020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road.
020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street.
024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



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...Talk to the experts

FILM FRANCHISE

Godzilla



As the big guy turns 60 we look back at the history of Japan's most famous cinematic export...

The US poster art for *Godzilla 2000* captures the creature at its destructive best...



Hail to the king: The original 1954 film was retitled *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* for its US release in 1956 and used specially-shot scenes featuring actor Raymond Burr spliced into the movie.

THE HISTORY OF cinema is littered with memorable monsters, yet only a handful of them can boast of having had anything like the impact and legacy of the Japanese giant of the silver screen: Godzilla.

Not only did director Ishirō Honda's 1954 film about a massive fire-breathing beast prove a hit at the box office (although not with critics), it also brought about the dawn of a brand-new film genre. Over the following decades Kaiju (literally: 'strange creature') films would bear witness to countless men

dressed in giant monster suits smashing up model replicas of Japanese cities.

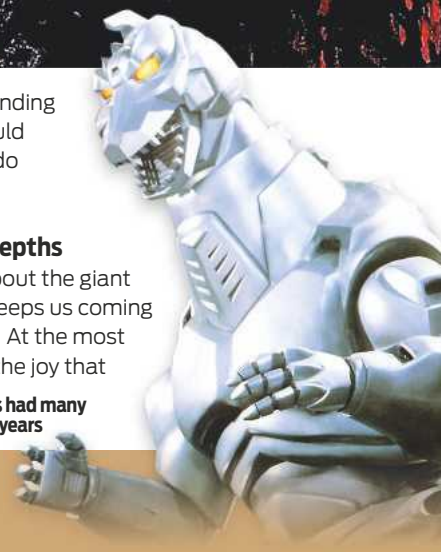
Obviously not content with simply creating a new genre, Godzilla also went on to dominate it, clocking up a whopping 28 instalments between the 1954 original and 2004's 50th anniversary monster mash *Godzilla: Final Wars*. In addition to that he's also starred in two cartoon series and appeared in numerous comics and videogames. And who can forget Roland Emmerich's 1998 Hollywood remake? Well, if it lives up to the trailers, Gareth

Edwards' impending US reboot should finally help us do just that...

Up from the depths

So what is it about the giant monster that keeps us coming back for more? At the most basic level it's the joy that

MechaGodzilla has had many upgrades over the years





PICK OF THE BEST...

1 Godzilla

Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, the original *Godzilla* (aka *Gojira*) remains an astonishingly powerful and bleak film that serves as one of the best (and most influential) monster movies ever made, as well as being a surprisingly potent post-nuclear parable. Just make sure you watch the original Japanese version and not the politically-neutered American re-edit.

2 Mothra vs. Godzilla

The fourth instalment in the original series of films, this 1964 outing pits Godzilla against the enormous moth-like protector of the planet who had previously starred in Toho's 1961 smash *Mothra*. An all-time classic creature-feature.

3 Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah

This 1991 sequel throws together Godzilla, King Ghidorah and Mecha-King Ghidorah in a story involving time travel, androids and aliens to spectacular effect. The fact that it finally establishes an origin for Godzilla is just the icing on this delicious Kaiju cake.

AND THE WORST...

Godzilla's Revenge

Those who think that Hollywood's 1998 reboot is the worst Godzilla film need to take a long hard look at this 1969 dud. The story follows a small boy who dreams he visits Monster Island (cue plenty of stock footage from the previous films), befriends Godzilla's offspring Minilla (who can now speak) and learns how to face his fears and deal with bullies. Urgh...

Godzilla vs Godzilla: The Japanese giant faced off against his CGI US counterpart in 2004's *Godzilla: Final Wars*. Suffice to say the resulting scrap was short and didn't end well for the Hollywood imposter.



comes from watching destruction on an epic scale. For all of the sci-fi trappings the series has acquired, these films are essentially disaster movies.

However, the difference here is that the destructive force of nature has been given a physical form for us to rail against or root for (Godzilla has been both a menace to and protector of humanity over the decades). And anyway, if you can't see the inherent appeal in a film about a giant lizard fighting a massive moth, there's simply no hope for you...

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting Kaiju freak can afford to miss out on these...

RC MechaGodzilla 1974



Released in Japan in 2008, Bandai's radio-controlled MechaGodzilla stands 20in tall and can stomp around under your control. Expect to pay upwards of £600 these days!

The Super Shinobi



The original release of this 1989 Mega Drive game (aka *The Revenge of Shinobi*) was changed due to the unlicensed use of characters such as Batman and Godzilla.

S.H. MonsterArts Godzilla 2000



Produced by the Tamashii Nations collector's division of Bandai, the S.H. MonsterArts range of Godzilla toys can't be topped. While every single figure is a work of art, we're especially fond of this one based on concept art for *Godzilla 2000*.

Gojira Movie Poster



There's no shortage of great Godzilla posters to choose from when decorating your movie room, but the first port of call for any true G-Fan has to be the original 1954 Japanese theatrical release version.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Complete your monster-movie shelf with the following discs...

Godzilla: Final Box
(R2 DVD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla: Final Wars – SE
(R2 DVD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla: The Original Animated Series – Vol. 1 & 2
(R1 DVD – US Import)

Godzilla [1985]
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla: Final Wars
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla, Mothra and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. Destroyah
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla II
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. Megaguirus
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. Mothra [1992]
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Godzilla vs. Spacegodzilla
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Mothra vs. Godzilla
(Region A BD – Japanese Import)

Destroy All Monsters



(All-region BD – US Import)

Godzilla: Criterion Collection
(Region A BD – US Import)

Godzilla vs. Biollante
(Region A BD – US Import)

Godzilla: Mastered in 4K [1998]
(All-region BD – US Import)



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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **12 YEARS A SLAVE** Steve McQueen's award-winning true story makes its bow on Blu-ray **AMERICAN HUSTLE** The con is on in high-definition **THE COUNSELLOR** Ridley Scott loses the plot with this complex crime thriller **NYMPH()MANIAC** The ultimate Blu movie(s)? **PARKS AND RECREATION** Bumper 12-disc boxset brings the laughter to DVD **AND MUCH MORE!**

Teenage torment

Carrie → MGM/20th Century Fox → All-region BD

Stephen King's classic tale of telekinetic terror is re-imagined for the YouTube generation. Turn to p97 to find out if this new version still has the power to scare us silly...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



12 Years a Slave picked up three Oscars including Best Picture

DISC OF THE MONTH



Truth is much worse than fiction

Director Steve McQueen delivers that rarest of films: one that is both important and brilliant

→ 12 YEARS A SLAVE

Based on a true story, *12 Years a Slave* tells the tale of black violinist Solomon Northup, who was born free in New York, only to be kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841. As the title indicates it would be 12 long, painful years before he finally regained his freedom and was able to return to his family.

Anybody expecting something akin to the detached irony of Tarantino's *Django Unchained* should look elsewhere. As fans of director Steve McQueen's previous films will no doubt expect, *12 Years a Slave* is a formal masterpiece, a flawlessly executed piece of filmmaking that is utterly unflinching in its depiction of the daily horrors slaves were regularly subjected to. Add to that a roster of incredible performances (none better than Chiwetel Ejiofor as Northup) and you have a truly impressive movie about a shameful period of history that simply screams out to be seen.

Picture: Cinematographer Sean Bobbitt has been justifiably lauded for his work on *12 Years a Slave*, highlighting the natural beauty of the Louisiana locations to serve as a counterpoint to the horrible acts of violence they witness. And his craftsmanship is perfectly recreated in the stunning AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode on this Blu-ray platter.

The colour palette is richly saturated and bursting with vibrant tones, and the level of fine detailing shines through in both the rough-hewn textures of the slaves' clothes and the myriad scars their bodies bear. Fleshtones also hold up extremely well, with



HCC VERDICT

12 Years a Slave

→ EntertainmentOne

→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: While more extras wouldn't have gone amiss, this is still a great disc for a remarkable film

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

subtle variations in shade evident across the full range of skin colours on display. Meanwhile, black levels are absolutely impeccable, which only helps to isolate characters inside shots, as typified by the scene in Chapter 3 when Solomon wakes up to find himself in chains.

Audio: *12 Years a Slave* features an impressively involving DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 track that makes full use of the 360-degree soundfield to bring you into Solomon's world. For instance, a voyage up the river to New Orleans in Chapter 6 is transformed into something truly nightmarish as the wooden frame of the vessel creaks around you and the ceaseless sound of the paddle steamer's churning wheel grows louder and louder.

Dialogue is also expertly handled throughout, never once being overwhelmed by the rest of the mix. Similar praise is also deserved for the track's evocative presentation of Hans Zimmer's string-infused score.

Extras: Pick of the extras is the two-part *12 Years a Slave: A Historical Portrait*. Running 41 minutes in total, it explores the making of the film through in-depth interviews with the cast and crew, interspersed by Ejiofor reading selected extracts from Solomon Northup's original book.

Also included on the disc are two additional featurettes. *The Team* (eight minutes) takes a more detailed look at the film's crew as it explores the costumes, production design and makeup. As you might expect, *The Score* (four minutes) looks at composer Zimmer's contribution to the film.

Blue is the Warmest Colour

Artificial Eye → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux give two of the bravest and most committed performances you'll

ever see in this electrifying account of the love affair that springs up between two young girls. A shockingly intimate piece of human drama (thanks to both the way so much of it is shot in close up, and the many explicit sexual scenes), *Blue is the Warmest Colour* is the type of film you're not likely to forget in a hurry. The Blu-ray also makes a lasting impression courtesy of its excellent 2.40:1 Full HD visuals and atmospheric DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio.



Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom

Pathé! → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This plodding biopic clearly struggles with the symbolic weight of its subject. Content to merely recount the

pivotal moments in Nelson Mandela's life, ...*Long Walk to Freedom* ultimately fails to give you any greater understanding of the man than could be gleaned by reading a short bullet-point precis of the events. At least the Blu-ray doesn't really put a foot wrong. The disc's robust AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery is authentically film-like, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is truly immersive and there's a reasonably informative batch of extras for you to explore.



Dom Hemingway

Paramount → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Jude Law does his best to channel his inner 'Sexy Beast' playing a swearsy safecracker just released from prison in

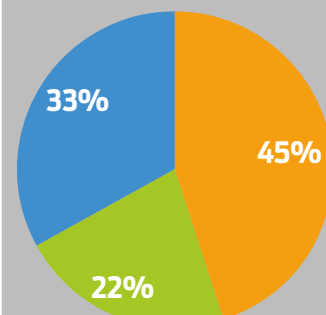
this darkly comic crime thriller. While the film itself is rather uneven and curiously stagey (despite being an original film script), it manages to keep your interest thanks to some winning performances – most notably Law and his partner in crime Richard E. Grant. Lionsgate's Blu-ray certainly looks and sounds the part, care of a vibrant 2.40:1-framed Full HD encode and lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. Sadly the same amount of effort wasn't put into the disc's meagre array of extras.



WE ASKED...

Which of these comic book blockbusters are you most excited about?

- Avengers: Age of Ultron
- Batman vs. Superman
- Neither, I hate superhero films



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Revisiting King's disco inferno

Being a teen is tough at the best of times without worrying about telekinetic powers

→ CARRIE

This fourth screen take on Stephen King's first best-seller (don't tell us you forgot about 1999's *The Rage: Carrie 2* and 2002's TV movie?) still finds it almost impossible to escape from the shadow of Brian De Palma's original 1976 adaptation. While the storyline has been updated to bring cyber-bullying into the mix, otherwise it's business as usual, with the exact same story beats being played out yet again.

That's not to say that genre fans should automatically give it a pass. While director Kimberly Peirce fails to conjure up anything remotely close to De Palma's stylistic flair and split-screen bravado in the climactic scenes of telekinetic chaos, she does take a more sympathetic approach to many of the supporting characters (even Carrie's mother, played here by Julianne Moore). And if Chloë Grace Moretz can't hope to compete with Sissy Spacek when it comes to playing the early scenes of Carrie as a shy, withdrawn victim of bullying, she more than comes into her own when the victimised adolescent takes control of her powers.

Picture: There's a lot to enjoy about MGM/20th Century Fox's Blu-ray presentation of *Carrie*. The AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p visuals burst with rich, vibrant primary colours and strong detailing. Contrast is also excellent, with rock-solid black levels – handy when it comes to bringing atmosphere to the film's night-time finale.

Audio: Somebody clearly had a lot of fun creating the audio mix to accompany Carrie's mind-based abilities. Whenever she unleashes her skills at home the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is filled with groans



and creaks as the building sounds like it's trying to twist around her. Unsurprisingly, things ramp up to another level when Carrie cuts loose at the prom (Chapter 23), with the crowd screaming as lighting fixtures explode and flames engulf the auditorium. All told, it's a very involving and convincing piece of sound design.

Extras: This Blu-ray gives you two versions of the film to watch – the original theatrical cut (100 minutes) and a version with an alternate ending, that provides a neat twist on the famous coda to De Palma's film (101 minutes).

Bonus material takes the form of a feature-length audio commentary from the director (who sees the film as a superhero origin movie...), nine deleted/alternate scenes (with optional commentary), a 21-minute *Making of...*, a short featurette about telekinesis, the trailer and a hidden camera PR stunt designed to promote the film online.



HCC VERDICT

Carrie

→ MGM/20th Century Fox
→ All-region BD → £20 Approx
WE SAY: A strong hi-def outing for a well-crafted new take on a rather familiar tale of teen terror

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

It's like the Seventies equivalent of that Oscars 'selfie'...



Cinematic con gets the job done

David O. Russell's crime caper may play fast and loose with the facts, but it's all the better for it



Amy Adams previously worked with David O Russell on 2010's *The Fighter*

→ AMERICAN HUSTLE

'Some of this actually happened' reads an onscreen caption at the start of David O. Russell's *American Hustle*. Exactly which parts are true doesn't actually matter, as Russell has simply used the genuine 1970s FBI Abscam sting as the springboard for a story that is both a wickedly entertaining crime caper and a richly-layered character study.

When pudgy, balding con artist Irving Rosenfeld (Christian Bale) meets the enigmatic Sydney Prosser (Amy Adams), the sparks really fly. Won over by a shared love of Duke Ellington and Irving's abundance of self-confidence, Sydney becomes Irving's partner in crime and his mistress.

Trouble looms when one of the targets of their latest get-rich-quick scheme turns out to be up-and-coming FBI agent Richie DiMaso (Bradley Cooper), who uses their arrest as leverage to force them into helping him cook up a much larger con designed to ensnare corrupt politicians, including New Jersey Mayor Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner). But as Richie starts casting the scam's net wider and wider, setting his sights on the Mafia, things start to become more dangerous for Irving and Sydney – especially when Irving's loose cannon wife Rosalyn (Jennifer Lawrence) is added to the increasingly combustible mix.

While *American Hustle* frequently harks back to the distinct 1970s period style Scorsese developed

DEMO SCREEN...

American Hustle

Time code: 057.01 – 061.05



Out on the town: A quick heart-to-heart on the way to Studio 54 gives you the chance to admire the intricate detailing evident in the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode's treatment of the period clothes.



Saturday night fever: The dance floor action helps showcase the rich palette thanks to the coloured lights, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix works wonders with Donna Summer's disco hit *I Feel Love*.



Black out: Your home cinema display's ability to replicate impossibly deep blacks is pushed to the limit as somebody hits the button marked 'strobe lighting' in the nightclub.



Belting it out: Meanwhile, Irving and Carmine are enjoying a night out on the town themselves, singing along as the rich tones of Tom Jones belting out *Delilah* fills the soundstage.



While the film was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, it won none

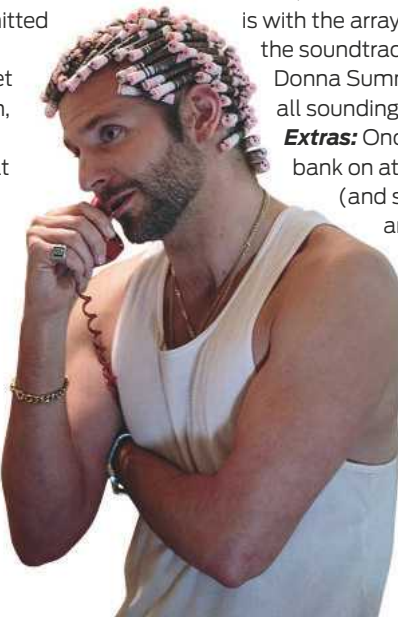
in *Goodfellas* and *Casino* (De Niro even cameos as a mobster) there's none of those films' in-depth exploration of the mechanisms of crime. Instead, *American Hustle*'s freewheeling plot is nothing more than a way of allowing Russell to deliver a probing insight into five fascinating characters and the unpredictable events that shape and change them.

None of which would be worth anything if it wasn't for an excellent script bristling with wonderful dialogue (co-written by Russell and Eric Warren Singer) and the actors who sink deep into their roles. While all of the five principals are worthy of praise, it's Christian Bale and Amy Adams who deserve the major plaudits. Bale is almost unrecognisable behind his pot belly and ludicrous comb-over, having piled on 40 pounds to play the dishevelled Irving. Meanwhile Adams continues to impress as one of the best actresses around, nailing a brilliantly mischievous performance of rare intensity, that sees Sydney (and her English well-to-do alter-ego Edith Greensly) effortlessly switch from anxious to hard-edged in the blink of an eye.

The only downside to this committed focus on the characters is that the filmmakers allow the narrative to get away from them at the end. As such, the final twist comes as an anti-climax, lacking the major payoff that it all seems to be building towards. This may be the more realistic ending, but given how far the film drifts from real events elsewhere, would it really have hurt to cook up something a little smarter and less predictable for the finale?

Picture: *American Hustle* arrives on Blu-ray with an authentically thick,

Bradley Cooper doing his best impression of Hilda Ogden



film-like texture that still manages to dazzle with its rich saturation and superb clarity.

Dominated by the gaudier end of the colour spectrum, the film's palette is rich and warm, with even skin tones affecting a deliberately gold-hued look (particularly when it comes to shots of Adams). Fine detailing is also impeccable, allowing you to truly appreciate the effort that went in to creating the many and varied period costumes on show. This also extends to shadow detail, with black crush held at bay throughout.

The encode itself is also extremely technically proficient, with no bothersome edge enhancement, artefacting or pixelation spoiling the view.

Audio: The film's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack may not be given over to too much in the way of surround activity, but it still gets the very best of the material it's been given to work with.

Dialogue is crystal clear at all times and stereo separation across the front speakers is entirely convincing and helps widen the soundstage. However, where the mix really comes into its own is with the array of classic 70s tunes that litter the soundtrack, with the likes of Chicago, Donna Summer and Paul McCartney & Wings all sounding rather magnificent.

Extras: Once upon a time you could always bank on at least one audio commentary (and sometimes two) accompanying any new David O. Russell film.

Sadly, like *Silver Linings Playbook* before it, *American Hustle* has none. In fact it really doesn't have much at all in the way of extras – just a 17-minute *Making of...* featurette and a collection of eleven deleted scenes. As interesting as these are, the film really deserves more.



Yoga was much more of a 'hands-on' exercise during the Seventies



HCC VERDICT

American Hustle

→ Entertainment in Video
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: It may be lacking in extras, but this Blu-ray is no con-job when it comes to AV performance

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

inFamous: Second Son

Sony Computer Entertainment → PS4 → £60 Approx



Is this the game that PS4 owners have been crying out for? Possibly. This loose sequel to *inFamous 2*, developed by Sucker Punch Productions and exclusive to Sony's next-gen console, is a graphical *tour de force* that makes the most of the processing power on offer, painting a gorgeous, spookily-lit eye-opening open-world Seattle for gamers to gad about in.

Like its predecessors, *inFamous: Second Son* uses a third-person perspective to put players in control of the parkour-skilled, superpowered ('Conduit') protagonist – in this case a young waif

called Delsin Rowe. Gaming generally revolves around roaming the city, building up your powers and doing battle with series baddies the Department of Unified Protection (or just prattling around blowing up cars and leaping off buildings, if you want). With Rowe's weird powers, particularly smoke-related weapons, combat is fresh and exciting, but the plot here isn't the most intriguing, nor is the game the most challenging. Thankfully, the option to play as either a hero or anti-hero goes some way to doubling its running time.

But this is really all about the graphics – these visuals are, at times, simply awe-inspiring. PS4 owners should put it on their shopping list just for that.



South Park: The Stick of Truth

Ubisoft → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £45 Approx



It's taken six attempts and more than 15 years, but fans of Trey Stone and Matt Parker's controversial cartoon finally have a videogame spin-off to be proud of. Despite a year-long delay and rumours of a troubled production, Obsidian Entertainment's *South Park: The Stick of Truth* has emerged from production as a very



entertaining role-playing game that – thanks to the authentic visual style, outrageous humour and voice acting – is as close as you could ever get to a fully interactive episode of the show.

The game casts you in the role of 'New Kid', a newcomer to the eponymous town who becomes embroiled in an epic live-action role-playing game pitting two armies against each other for control of the 'Stick of Truth'. But as the game escalates the kids find themselves drawn into conflict with anally-fixated aliens, Nazi zombies and other diabolical forces of evil. What this all boils down to in pure gameplay terms is a fairly straightforward – but very enjoyable – addition to the RPG genre, where you explore the town, solve puzzles, stock up on copious amounts of loot and battle through countless turn-based battles (albeit with explosive farts replacing magic spells). It's just a shame that Ubisoft took it upon itself to censor the console versions of the game in Europe, which is surely against the spirit of everything *South Park* stands for.



Pit Stop

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£25 Approx



Arrow has engineered a stunning Blu-ray edition of Jack Hill's 1969 'art film about stock car racing'. Restored from the director's own 35mm answer print (the best surviving element), the disc's fantastic AVC 1.78:1 1080p presentation certainly aids your appreciation of the film – as do the wonderful extras that accompany it, which include a chat-track by Hill, interviews with producer Roger Corman and actor Sid Haig, and a fascinating look at the restoration process.



The Musketeers: Series One

BBC Worldwide → Region B BD
£30 Approx



This rip-roaring take on Alexandre Dumas' novel finds the BBC's drama department firing on all cylinders with ten thrilling tales of derring-do loaded with action. As such you'd expect it to really deliver the goods as a Blu-ray release. And indeed, the 1.78:1-framed 1080i50 encodes look very good, with authentically muted colours and plenty of detail. However, given all of the action, it's impossible to fathom why the BBC has opted to saddle the episodes with modest DTS-HD MA 2.0 sonics instead of more dynamic 5.1 mixes.



Eastbound & Down: The Complete Fourth Season

HBO Home Entertainment
All-region BD → £30 Approx



After a rather disappointing third inning, HBO's series about burned-out former baseball pro Kenny Powers (Danny McBride) picks itself up and comes back swinging for this final outing. As with the previous releases, this latest two-disc set is unlikely to set the world on fire with its AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode, but it remains an accurate reflection of the show's original aesthetic. Extras include commentaries for all eight episodes and outtakes.



If there was ever a day to visit the set of *The Counsellor*, then this was it!



The people vs. Ridley Scott

The biggest crime here is wasting so much talent on such a frustrating piece of filmmaking

→ THE COUNSELLOR

There's a fine line between creating a narrative that remains intriguingly opaque and one that simply infuriates by stubbornly refusing to allow you to engage with it on any level. Joel and Ethan Coen judged it to perfection with their 2008 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of Ridley Scott and this 'thriller' based on an original script by the same author.

At its heart *The Counsellor* is a fairly straightforward crime movie about a man (Michael Fassbender's nameless 'counsellor') who gets involved with a heroin-smuggling scheme, only to watch everything fall apart around him. However, rather than simply tell that story, screenwriter McCarthy and director Scott obfuscate anything that could be considered traditional storytelling. It's almost as if somebody has cut out any scene that focuses on plot or characterisation, leaving us with little more than a series of lengthy monologues about sex, relationships and philosophy.

While the result is certainly not dull (a scene with Cameron Diaz, erm, making love to a car is certainly memorable), it is incredibly frustrating. As usual

Prometheus' David 8 felt more human than Fassbender's role in this film



with Scott it looks fantastic and it's twisty enough to keeping you guessing right up to the bitter end. But it's also impossible not to see the potential for something truly great in *The Counsellor*, and you'll wonder if that could have been achieved had writer and director not been so afraid of employing traditional storytelling techniques.

Picture: Shot using Red Epic cameras, *The Counsellor* looks sensational on Blu-ray. From the heavily stylised opening scenes to the film's many wide open exteriors, this AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode appears technically flawless. Colours are rich and vibrant; detailing is exquisite in its intricacy; blacks are unfathomably deep; and contrast levels are impeccable. A cracker.

Audio: While the film has a tendency to favour dialogue over action, this Blu-ray release still serves up some satisfying DTS-HD MA 5.1 thrills. Chapter 21's highway shootout demonstrates excellent positional effects, while a brief car chase in Chapter 24 reveals excellent bass response as well.

Extras: The set's first BD platter houses the 117-min theatrical cut alongside a trio of viral videos, plus a collection of trailers and TV spots. The second BD is home to the 138-min extended cut, plus a 216-min alternate viewing mode that mixes a commentary from Scott with 13 branching featurettes.



Meridian Audio's DSP7200 Digital Active Loudspeaker makes a cameo in the film



HCC VERDICT

The Counsellor: Extended Cut
→ 20th Century Fox

→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: The film may be incredibly frustrating, but that hasn't stopped it getting top-tier treatment on Blu-ray

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Amy Poehler always enjoys a game of spot the difference between takes

Big laughs from a small town

Gorge yourself on one of the smartest and funniest sitcoms around with this 12-disc DVD boxset

→ **PARKS AND RECREATION: SEASONS ONE, TWO, THREE & FOUR**



The brainchild of the same people responsible for the US version of *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation* takes a similar faux-documentary sitcom approach to another work environment. Only this time the focus is the parks and recreation department of the fictional Indiana town of Pawnee.

While this allows the show to mine smalltown bureaucracy for laughs (and plenty of them), what makes it really unique is its lack of cynicism. In any other sitcom, ambitious deputy director Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) would be a figure of ridicule, but here she's the unabashed star of the show, a battering ram of optimism whose belief in local government is both contagious and refreshing.

Picture: All four seasons of *Parks and Recreation* hold up perfectly well on DVD, being easily on a par with the original broadcast versions.

The 68 anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers (plus the smattering of alternate cuts included as extras) spread across the set's 12 discs share a warmly saturated, crisply rendered aesthetic that appears wholly authentic to the source material. Better yet, there's a distinct lack of noticeable edge enhancement or image noise.

Audio: Every episode features a Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack – although it's worth remembering that this is a documentary-style sitcom, not an action-packed drama.

The main focus of the tracks is the front of the soundstage, which excels at reproducing and prioritising the all-important dialogue. That said, the use of Foley effects and performances by Andy (Chris Pratt)'s band Mouse Rat give the 5.1 tracks the chance to stretch their legs a little in terms of dynamic range, if not surround effects.

Extras: The single-disc Season One finds space for an extended episode, 23 minutes of deleted scenes, two music videos and six episode commentaries.

Running to 24 episodes, Season Two is spread across four discs. Extras include over 160 minutes of deleted scenes; three extended episodes; six episode commentaries; a promo for Season Three; a blooper reel; five behind-the-scenes webisodes; footage of Mouse Rat playing the wrap party; a performance of the theme song by composer Gabby Moreno; an explanation of why the show is 'the Wu-Tang of comedy' by Roots drummer Questlove; and five fun Winter Olympics promos.

Season Three splits its 16 episodes across three discs. They also include three extended episodes, 48 minutes of deleted scenes, a gag reel, four promo spots, six episode commentaries, three in-show commercials in full and a tribute to L'il Sebastian.

The fourth season bulks back up to 20 episodes across four discs. Sadly there are no commentaries, but you do get four 'Road Trip' webisodes, a gag reel, 93 minutes of deleted scenes, three campaign ads, a music video, four extended episodes, outtakes, promo videos and more.

So, plenty of extras for fans to get through!

HCC VERDICT

Parks and Recreation: Seasons One, Two, Three & Four

→ Fabulous Films

→ R2 DVD → £85 Approx

WE SAY: A bumper DVD boxset of sitcom brilliance. Simply unmissable

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Dolls

101 Films → Region B BD
£16 Approx



This tongue-in-cheek fright flick follows six strangers trapped in an isolated mansion during a thunderstorm with a creepy old couple and their extensive collection of (deadly) dollies. While *Dolls* doesn't quite hit the same dizzying heights as director Stuart Gordon's earlier *Re-Animator* or *From Beyond*, fans of the macabre will still find plenty to enjoy here. As the first release in 101 Films' 'Cult Horror Collection' Blu-ray range, *Dolls* bodes well for the future with its cleanly rendered AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals and faithful DTS-HD MA 2.0 soundtrack. The disc also includes a fun commentary.



Lord of Illusions

101 Films → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£16 Approx



Author Clive Barker's third (and to date, final) outing as director stills holds up as an effective blend of the film noir and horror genres. Less well remembered than either *Hellraiser* or *Nightbreed*, the film tells the story of a detective (Scott Bakula) hired to investigate the murder of a stage illusionist who may have had real magic powers. 101 Films' Blu-ray features a pleasing AVC 1.85:1 encode transfer of the theatrical cut – although it's a shame that the soundtrack is only LPCM 2.0 as the old DVD offered a DD5.1 mix. A DVD of the superior Extended Cut is also included, and features a director's commentary.



Jackass Presents: Bad Grandpa

Paramount → All-region BD
£25 Approx



This third *Jackass* movie frames its crazy hidden camera stunts inside a story about the titular old grouch (Johnny Knoxville under a lot of latex) travelling across the US to drop off his grandson with the kid's deadbeat dad. While most of the pranks are as cruel and juvenile as ever, somehow the film also manages to be surprisingly touching, making you really care about the relationship that develops between its two protagonists. Naturally, the hidden camera nature of the film ensures that this Blu-ray isn't one you'll be using to demo your setup.



The Harry Hill Movie

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Even those of us who usually enjoy Harry Hill's brand of surreal silliness on the small screen will find that there is very little enjoyment to be had with this film. Infrequent moments of oddball pleasure are there to be found (gun-totting chickens, a Godzilla-esque giant hamster) but are soon sidelined by lame gags, outdated spoofs (*Kill Bill*, really?) and too much Matt Lucas. Still, there's no denying that the film does at least look pretty in HD thanks to the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode's vibrant palette and impressive clarity. However, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is too front-biased and there are no extras.



All the sex, none of the sexiness

Notorious Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier is out to stir up some controversy. Again

→ NYPHOMANIAC: VOLUMES I & II

Lars von Trier's four-hour, two-movie epic tells the story of self-confessed nymphomaniac Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg). Having been assaulted and left lying beaten in an alley, she is discovered by a lonely bachelor called Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) who takes her into his home. While recuperating, she passes the time by telling her saviour about her sordid life, splitting the saga into eight chapters.

For all of the naked flesh and thrusting body parts on display, *Nymphomaniac* is actually one of the least sexy films you'll ever see. Rather, it's confrontational, philosophical and – most surprising of all – cut through with a rich vein of humour. And very long indeed.

Picture: While it lacks the kind of intricate tableaux that made von Trier's *Melancholia* such a beguiling experience on Blu-ray, *Nymphomaniac* still holds up well on its hi-def debut. Sensibly Artificial Eye has given each 'Volume' a disc of its own, with both parts of the film framed predominantly at 2.40:1. There are occasional exceptions however, including the entirety of 'Chapter Three: Mrs. H' (running across Chapters 8 and 9 of the first BD platter), which is framed at 1.85:1 within the 2.40:1 image.

Likewise, while much of the film has a very crisp digital sheen, the use of other source material (such as the pixelated fishing inserts used in 'Chapter One: The Compleat Angler', and the far grainier stock used to shoot the flashbacks in 'Chapter Eight: The Gun') does mean that overall image quality is not consistent across the entire four-hour experience.



HCC VERDICT

Nymphomaniac: Volumes I & II

→ Region B BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: Not the most pleasurable hi-def experience you'll ever have, but a fine Blu-ray package nonetheless

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Audio: Both discs feature a choice of DTS-HD MA 5.1 and LPCM 2.0 soundtracks. In truth, there's not that much to call between them, as use of the rear speakers in the surround track is fairly limited outside of the odd atmospheric effects and allowing any music in the mix a little more freedom to breathe. Where both of the soundtracks excel is with the film's dialogue, which is prioritised beautifully, sounding rich and natural at all times.

Extras: The first Blu-ray is accompanied by a quartet of interviews with actors Charlotte Gainsbourg (12 minutes), Shia LaBeouf (nine minutes), Stacy Martin (ten minutes) and Stellan Skarsgård (11 minutes). The sole extra on the second platter is a 24-minute Q&A with actors Skarsgård, Martin and Sophie Kennedy Clarke, moderated by Edith Bowman, recorded after a screening of the film. All are very interesting and eye-opening, but the lack of input from von Trier himself is disappointing.



Cult flick gets a killer Blu-ray release

A new restoration and exhaustive extras mark out this package as something special

→ WHITE OF THE EYE

The third of four films by the late director Donald Cammell is a curious mix of Giallo-style murder mystery and smalltown domestic drama. As you might expect from Cammell's other films (*Performance*, *Demon Seed* and *Wild Side*) what would undoubtedly have been a routine thriller in the hands of anyone else has been transformed into a stylistic *tour-de-force*, loaded with symbolism and introspection. Flawed but definitely fascinating.

Picture: *White of the Eye* has been painstakingly restored for this hi-def release and the results are extremely impressive. Given how tricky much of the imagery must have been to reproduce accurately (particularly the extremely grainy low-light shots), this Blu-ray does a masterful job of faithfully recreating Cammell's varying aesthetic choices for the film.

Audio: The disc's LPCM 2.0 track is perfectly acceptable, given the limitations of the source. Dialogue is cleanly rendered, Foley effects are well balanced in the mix and the music score (composed by guitarist Rick Fenn and Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason) sounds electrifying.

Extras: Arrow has pulled together a shockingly comprehensive collection of bonus features for this Blu-ray release. Cammell biographer Sam Umland provides a hugely informative feature-length commentary for the film, and performs a similar duty on two deleted scenes, the original audio for them having been lost long ago.



'That was a short back and sides was it, sir?'



Made by the BBC in 1998, *The Ultimate Performance* is an absolutely wonderful 74-minute documentary looking back over Cammell's life and career.

Into the White is an 11-minute interview with 'co-cinematographer and Steadicam wizard' Larry McConkey. The disc also serves up alternate credits for the film and the flashback scenes as originally shot (prior to the bleach bypass process used on them in the final cut).

The Argument is a 1972 short by Cammell, assembled by his editor after his death. Once again, Sam Umland is on hand to provide a commentary.

Rounding out the set is a 40-page booklet containing writing about the film and director.

HCC VERDICT

White of the Eye

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Another exceptional hi-def package bursting at the seams with a rewarding array of bonus features

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell

Icon Home Entertainment
Region B BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx



While this final instalment in Hammer's *Frankenstein* series has never been regarded as one of its best, this new restoration does at least encourage a better appreciation of the effort

director Terence Fisher put into bringing it to the silver screen. Presented on the disc in both 1.66:1 ('Original UK Theatrical Version') and 1.37:1 ('Alternate Version') aspect ratios, the film has been restored to its gory, gothic best and we'd wager it hasn't looked this good in a very long time. Valuable extras include a fascinating audio commentary, a 25-minute *Making of...* and a 13-minute tribute to the director.



Blind Woman's Curse

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£25 Approx



Part Yakuza film, part ghost story and all nonsense, this Japanese curio from 1970 may not make a lick of sense, but

it is at least a whole heap of fun. It also looks surprisingly good in hi-def, with any flaws in the AVC 2.44:1 1080p image (including a handful of soft shots and rather flat contrast) seemingly inherent to the source material. If the LPCM dual-mono mix isn't as immediately impressive, it too has been cleaned up nicely for this release. Extras include a commentary by a genre expert and a collection of trailers for the equally bizarre looking *Stray Cat Rock* films.



White Dog

Eureka! Masters of Cinema
Region B BD/R2 DVD → £23 Approx



Sam Fuller's gripping tale of a black animal trainer (Paul Winfield) trying to recondition a dog trained to viciously

attack blacks was bizarrely accused of racism itself and shelved by its US distributor. Which is absolutely baffling, as *White Dog* is one of the most inspired critiques of institutionalised racism you will ever see. This Blu-ray more than does Fuller's misunderstood masterpiece proud with its attractive AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and source-accurate LPCM mono mix. An archival interview with the canine star by Fuller is just one of the treats to be found in the accompanying 48-page booklet.



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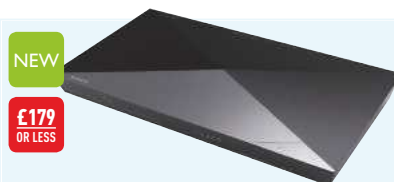


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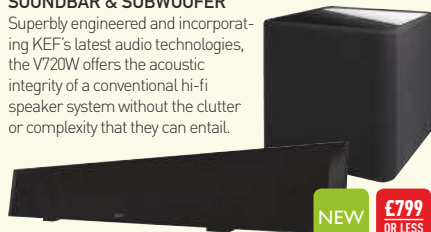
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**YAMAHA • YSP-1400
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The Yamaha YSP-1400 soundbar reproduces presence-rich sound over a wide area. Supporting both Bluetooth and a dedicated app for smartphone control, this new-generation soundbar increases enjoyment and convenience.



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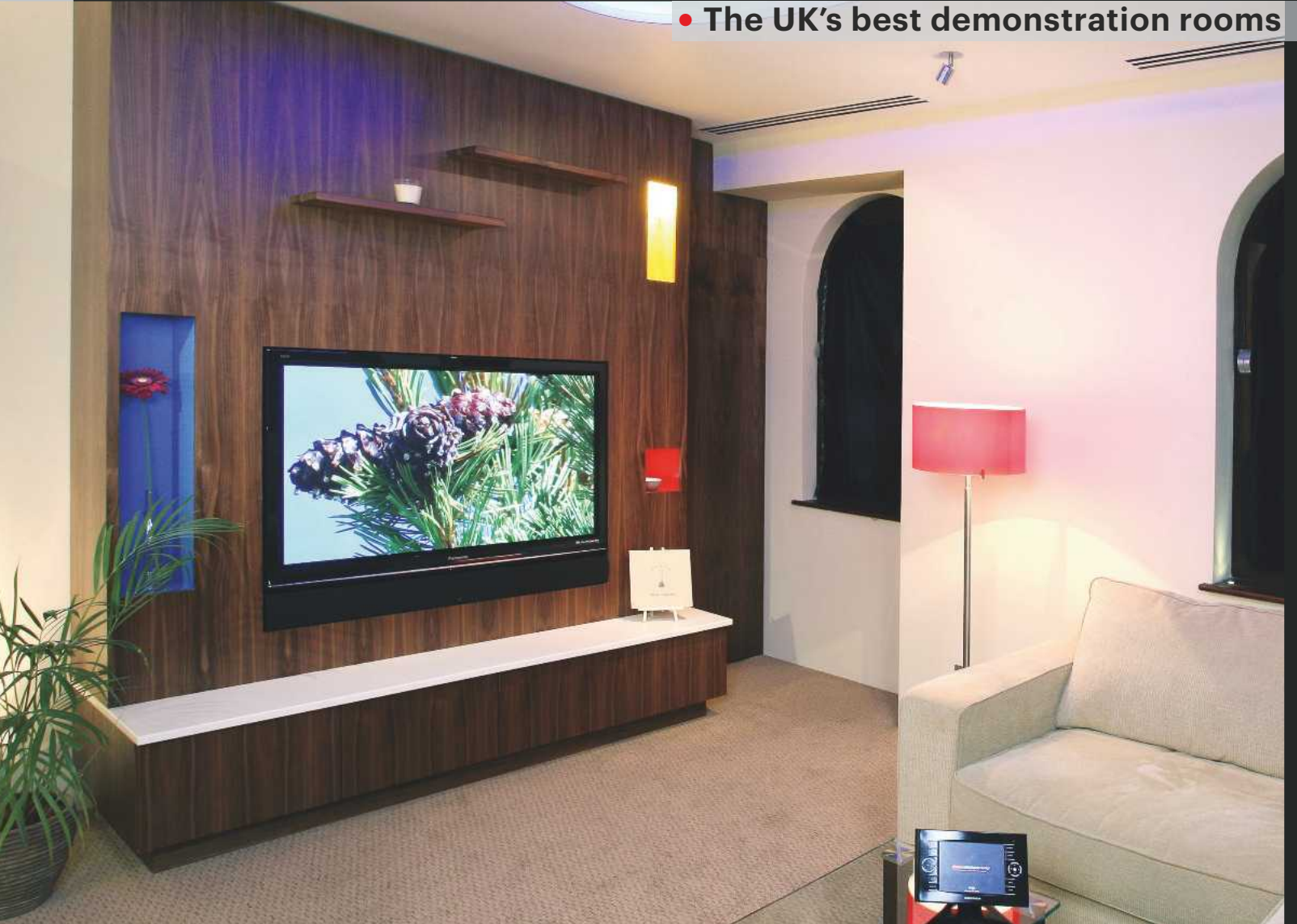
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SELECT

→ **GEAR GUIDE** **TELEVISIONS** From entry-level 40in LEDs to flagship monster plasmas
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AV RECEIVERS 5.1, 7.1, 9.2 – we've got all the options covered **SPEAKERS** Killer surround sound setups
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guide is here
to help

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★★☆☆
Dire	★★★☆☆

TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Samsung UE55F9000** → £3,300

★★★★★

After debuting with a £35,000 85in beast, Samsung enters the sensible Ultra HD TV arena with an absolute star. This neat-looking 55incher offers superb upscaling of regular HD sources and immersive active 3D. *HCC #226*

**Sony KDL-40W905A** → £1,400 ★★★★★

Faunting the brand's Triluminos edge LED lighting, this set majors on a startling colour performance, plus crisp delineation and authentic black levels. Pricey, but worth it. *HCC #222*

**Panasonic TX-P60ZT65** → £3,800 ★★★★★

This plasma lives up to its 'Beyond Reference' billing, with the best 1080p picture in town – imagery is effortlessly cinematic. But at this price, you might want 4K... *HCC #223*

**Samsung PS64F8500** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A new panel design has given Samsung's plasma tech a much needed injection of brightness and contrast. The result is a premium bigscreen display that constantly wows. *HCC #221*

**Sony KDL-65X9005A** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Sony's first-gen 65in UHD panel is a cracker, offering pin-sharp visuals and brilliant Passive 3D. Blacks aren't best-in-breed, though. *HCC #230*

**Sony KDL-50W829** → £900 ★★★★★

Impressively affordable, Sony's 50in LED stands out courtesy of brilliant motion handling and sharp Full HD imagery. The new 2014 user interface offers a few Smart tricks, too. *HCC #233*

**Panasonic TX-P42GT60** → £1,150 ★★★★★

This mid-range plasma still carries much of the technology found on Panasonic's higher-end PDPs, and delivers finessed, film-friendly Full HD visuals. Not very stylish, though. *HCC #226*

**Finlux 40F8073-T** → £300 ★★★★★

Wallet-friendly 40-incher that still offers handy Smart features, good connectivity and images that put other 'ultra-cheap' TVs to shame. The audio could do with a boost, however. *HCC #233*

**Toshiba 84L9363DB** → £7,000 ★★★★★

An 84in 4K screen for only £7,000 – this Tosh is certainly a bargain. Native 4K impresses in terms of clarity and colour punch, but motion and upscaling can be bettered. *HCC #231*

**LG 50PA650T** → £500 ★★★★★

A 50in plasma TV for £500 is hard to ignore, and this LG rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart tech here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling. *HCC #219*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 90ins are also hitting the high street – and 85in 4K panels are also on offer. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and more energy consumption. There's also a limited choice – only Samsung, LG and Panasonic are selling plasma TVs in the UK, and the latter will soon stop.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba, Sony, and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 on sale.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**Fast & Furious 6: Extended Action Packed Edition**

This is pure escapism on a cracking BD disc – the car acrobatics and rapid-fire fist-fights are delivered with pin-sharp 2.40:1 visuals and a precision-steered soundmix.

★★★★★

**Pacific Rim 3D**

While the lack of a 7.1 mix is disappointing, Guillermo del Toro's monster mash still delivers demo-worthy hi-def visuals in both its 2D and 3D incarnations. It also comes loaded with fantastic extras.

★★★★★

**Man of Steel 3D**

Looking for a lossless soundtrack that is guaranteed to push your audio setup to its absolute limits? Then do yourself (and your home cinema) a favour and pick up Superman's latest cinematic outing.

★★★★★

**Rush**

This Formula One biopic is simply magnificent, both in terms of production values/performances and its thrilling DTS-HD 5.1 mix. The BD hosts a nice selection of extras, too – an essential disc for petrolheads.

★★★★★

**Gravity 3D**

Alfonso Cuarón's sci-fi flick rewrites the rulebook on movie sound design, and stakes a claim to the 3D crown. A disc you'll return to again and again when you want to test your system – nice extras, too.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. A new model, the £600 BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. HCC #215/#228
- 2**  **Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★**
 This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. HCC #210
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105D → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds upon the premium picture performance of the BDP-103D with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. HCC #234
- 4**  **Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs. HCC #220
- 5**  **Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★★**
 An affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer. HCC #219
- 6**  **Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★★**
 As a 'transport', this universal deck lacks built-in decoders and analogue outs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded. HCC #217
- 7**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★★**
 Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricky, though. HCC #208
- 8**  **Sony BDP-S5100 → £140 ★★★★★**
 Smaller than many BD decks, Sony's 'Sense of Quartz'-styled spinner offers SACD compatibility and plenty of VOD content. The menu system needs streamlining, though. HCC #222
- 9**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT330 → £200 ★★★★★**
 New for 2013, this slim-line spinner is a solid choice, although the Viera Connect portal is beginning to feel a bit out-dated and the DMP-BDT500 (above) offers better features. HCC #221
- 10**  **Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★**
 The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart hub is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. HCC #227

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joystick is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The recent PS4 is a much better gaming machine, but currently doesn't offer 3D BD (or CD!) playback.



DEMO DELIGHT

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

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TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-VW500ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

Sony's second-gen 4K projector is around half the price of the VPL-VW1000ES (below) and comes with HDMI 2.0 chippery and Triluminos colour wizardry. Auditioning this class PJ is a no-brainer. *HCC #228*

**JVC X500R** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more adept third-generation of the brand's proprietary e-shift technology, the X500R continues JVC's winning ways – contrast rich, sharp and full of tweaks. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-VW1000ES** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so! *HCC #209*

**SIM2 Super Lumis** → £37,000 ★★★★★

With a more potent lamp than its Lumis forebear, this light-cannon from SIM2 costs an arm and leg, and is only Full HD, but delivers an astonishing level of performance. *HCC #227*

**Epson EH-TW7200** → £1,900 ★★★★★

Priced to appeal to those unable to dabble in the £3,000 market, Epson's mid-ranger is a great purchase. No frame interpolation on offer, but colours, contrast and brightness impress. *HCC #232*

**Sony VPL-HW55ES** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Not one of Sony's 4K models, but this keenly priced Full HD projector delivers where it counts, with solid calibration options, simple setup and brilliant 2D visuals. No 12V trigger. *HCC #230*

**Epson EH-TW9200W** → £3,000 ★★★★★

A brilliant mid-range projector with wireless HD transmission and ISF certification, yet the noise generated when running in 'Normal' lamp mode could be a concern for some. *HCC #231*

**Optoma HD30** → £1,100 ★★★★★

A step up from the HD25 (below), this claims an increased contrast ratio and again offers a pleasing bigscreen performance. UI could be better, and zoom is somewhat limited. *HCC #233*

**Optoma HD25** → £800 ★★★★★

Optoma's projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. A bit noisy. *HCC #220*

**BenQ W1070** → £700 ★★★★★

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certification. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though. *HCC #220*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500



A 7.1 array mixing both dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*



Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PVID subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too. *HCC #212*



Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub. *HCC #211*



Wharfedale Diamond 100 HCP → £950 ★★★★★

Yet another excellent affordable package from Wharfedale, the Diamond 100 HCP offers a sound quality beyond what you might expect from its sub-£1,000 ticket. Maturely styled. *HCC #224*



Kreisel Sound Quattro 7.2 → £8,500 ★★★★★

Mixing two mammoth woofers with some surprisingly manageable multi-tweeter speakers (including TriFX surrounds) this US package is supremely assured. *HCC #232*



Artcoustic Spitfire SL 7.2 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Slimmed-down cabinets now even easier to install on-wall or behind a screen, with a multi-driver design ensuring they're easy to drive to high SPLs. Ideal for dedicated rooms. *HCC #233*



DALI Epicon 5.1 → £17,000 ★★★★★

Not a cheap option, but buyers of this DALI package are rewarded by a sublime performance. Music and movies benefit from high-end proprietary tech; build quality is fantastic. *HCC #222*



Tannoy Precision Series 5.1 → £4,450 ★★★★★

These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. *HCC #226*



Monitor Audio Radius R90HTI → £1,500 ★★★★★

The long-loved Radius speakers have been revamped with new drivers and rear ports, and this 5.1 set provides a clear, detailed sound with plenty of heft. Looks good in white, too. *HCC #230*



Roth Oli RA 5.1 → £850 ★★★★★

A floorstanding array with neat design and reassuring build, this value-for-money pack delivers an impressive slice of scale to go with its full-range prowess. *HCC #233*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Man of Steel: Zack Snyder's reboot is a great BD for proving a speaker package's mettle. Head to the Smallville battle and be dazzled by a 7.1 mix with huge dynamics, incredible bass and remarkable surround steering – the latter most evident when General Zod removes his helmet and is overpowered by swirling, dizzying sounds.

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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony STR-DA5800ES** → £2,200

★★★★★

Sony's follow up to the STR-DA5700ES continues to pack handy features (built-in Ethernet switching, a unique video-on-demand platform), ups the channels to 9.2, and brings a suite of great post-processing modes. *HCC #223*

**Anthem MRX-510** → £1,700 ★★★★★

The Canadian brand returns in style with an AVR that ignores streaming/networking features but boasts supreme room EQ and eats movie soundtracks for breakfast. *HCC #232*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Krell Foundation** → £6,500 ★★★★★

One of the US marque's more affordable offerings, the Foundation is a seven-channel processor that delivers an insightful, smooth and epic sound. And it looks fab. *HCC #224*

**Yamaha CX-A5000** → £2,500 ★★★★★

Part of Yamaha's new high-end separates line (you can match it with the MX-A5000 amp), this 11-channel processor sounds clean, precise and offers a dizzying range of features. *HCC #228*

**Marantz AV8801** → £2,500 ★★★★★

The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance. *HCC #220*

**Onkyo TX-NR929** → £1,000 ★★★★★

You get a lot for your cash with this 9.2-channel model – built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi join THX Select2 certification and excellent connectivity. Creates a large, full-bodied soundstage. *HCC #231*

**Marantz NR1604** → £550 ★★★★★

The third generation of Marantz's slim-line AVR continues its living room-friendly work – easy to operate, fun-sounding, FLAC/Airplay-capable and boasting a great form factor. *HCC #233*

**Pioneer SC-LX87** → £2,000 ★★★★★

A multi-talented 9.2-channel AVR that excels in terms of clarity and scale. Wi-Fi is via a supplied adaptor, and the UI is beginning to look dated compared to the competition. *HCC #230*

**Yamaha RX-V675** → £500 ★★★★★

The new low/mid-range RX-V675 digs out all the sonic details of your Blu-ray platters and places them across the soundstage. A great-sounding AVR at a good price. Primitive UI. *HCC #225*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (pictured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 

1 Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers. HCC #197
- 

2 SVS SB-2000 → £650 ★★★★★ NEW ENTRY
With a new 12in driver and revamped 500W Sledge DSP amplifier, this mid-sized woofer offers immense value for money and imbibes BDs with potent LFE. Easily recommended. HCC #233
- 

3 JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 

4 Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too. HCC #208
- 

5 Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast. HCC #201
- 

6 REL Acoustics T-7 → £650 ★★★★★
The T-7 uses an 8in driver in tandem with a 10in passive radiator, and features simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and Class A/B amplification. An excellent all-rounder. HCC #223
- 

7 Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
On of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's revamped PVI uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 

8 REL Habitat 1 → £1,300 ★★★★★
With its LongBow wireless system and wall-mountable design, REL's newest woofer is aimed at those seeking discreet bass. Twin 6.5in drivers work fast and with considerable grip. HCC #231
- 

9 SVS SB12-NSD → £650 ★★★★★
A 12in driver squeezed into the smallest enclosure possible, the SB12-NSD packs a 400W 'Sledge' amp and offers a weighty yet fast and accurate sound. Looks a bit bland, though. HCC #223
- 

10 Quadral Qube 10 → £525 ★★★★★★
A gorgeous-looking woofer with a build quality that belies its lowly price tag, the Qube 10 takes Quadral's musical heritage and delivers a controlled, poised performance. HCC #223

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Oblivion: Joseph Kosinski's sophomore sci-fi flick looks spectacular on Blu-ray, and its visual panache is matched by a 7.1 audio mix that particularly impresses with its low-end extension. The subwoofer channel here is regularly employed, dropping deep and loud to accompany everything from explosions and weapons fire to the roaring engines of Tom Cruise's recon ship. Love your lows? Then love this.

Top 5 HD GAMES



Dead Rising 3
Killing hundreds of zombies with an outrageous range of weapons is the order of the day in this delightfully demented sequel. Certainly not the best-looking Xbox One title, but probably the most fun
★★★★★



Forza Motorsport 5
This game's headline trick is delivering its huge car collection and decent selection of tracks in wonderfully detailed 1080p at a silky smooth 60fps. That it's not quite perfect – dodgy AI, for a start – is less important.
★★★★★



Grand Theft Auto V
Rockstar's newest slice of car-jacking, gun-wielding fun is absolutely massive in both scale and ambition – a big-budget game that will leave a big grin on your face. Graphically gorgeous, and the 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.
★★★★★



Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
This sequel takes to the high seas for piratical fun, with an enormous open world, absorbing gameplay, beautiful graphics and a soundtrack packed with well-realised ambient effects.
★★★★★



Tomb Raider
Lara Croft returns in this fantastic reboot that breathes new life into the third-person action genre. With a great story and quality graphics and sonic design it feels like a Hollywood blockbuster. Just with a joypad.
★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Simple Audio Listen → £400 ★★★★★**
 Stereo Bluetooth/PC speakers with dollops of cool style, the Listens offer the kind of potent, full-bodied performance that you'd expect from their price tag. *HCC #232*
- 3 Devolo dLAN 500 AV Wireless+ → £130 ★★★★★**
 Combining Powerline Ethernet distribution with integrated Wi-Fi, this starter kit is a great purchase if you're looking to extend and simplify your home network. *HCC #222*
- 4 PSB M4U1 → £220 ★★★★★**
 These closed-back 'phones are excellent all-rounders – agile and clear with music, while possessing enough low-frequency prowess to give weight to BD soundtracks. Comfy, too. *HCC #221*
- 5 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 6 Roku 3 Streaming Player → £100 ★★★★★**
 This step-up streamer builds upon the cute design and simplified operation of the Roku LT with welcome additions including SD card support, headphone input and 1080p video. Neat. *HCC #230*
- 7 Philips Screeneo HDP1590 → £1,500 ★★★★★**
 Neatly designed, the Screeneo offers ultra-short throw projection thrills, albeit at 720p (and the DVB tuner is SD). Punchy speakers and networking skills complete a nice package. *HCC #233*
- 8 Microsoft Xbox One → £430 ★★★★★**
 Not as graphically potent as the PS4 (below) but the new Xbox lives up to its billing as a home entertainment hub – voice control and multi-tasking tricks prove very useful. *HCC #230*
- 9 One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★★**
 A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys. *HCC #220*
- 10 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**
 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. Yet it has a few foibles. Wanna play 3D BDs? You'll be disappointed. *HCC #229*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Third Season**

More fantastic fantasy TV delivered on Blu-ray – as with previous seasons, the AV quality here ensures the show's big-budget bombast shines through.

★★★★★

**The Walking Dead: The Complete Third Season**

The best series of zombie TV yet, this third run shuffles onto Blu-ray with authentic 1.78:1 HD imagery and atmospheric and spine-tingling DTS-HD MA sonics. Roll on S4.

★★★★★

**Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection**

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★★

**James Dean: Ultimate Collector's Edition**

Warner Home Video has given *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant* 4K restorations from their original camera negatives. The result is that these 1950s classics look fab.

★★★★★

**Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series**

Audio commentaries, short episode prequels and featurettes are among the extras on this set collecting 15 episodes of TARDIS-based fun. The 1080i transfers impress, too.

★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs


Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★


Sky+HD, £subscription

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★


Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★


Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350

Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★★


Samsung BD-F8500, £300

This 500GB model marries its Freeview+ PVR to a Wi-Fi-toting 3D Blu-ray player and offers copious catch-up TV options – it's just a shame they aren't integrated into the EPG environment

★★★★★

TOP 5 SOUNDBARS


Yamaha YSP-3300, £900

A slender soundbar/sub duo that offers a very effective virtual surround performance courtesy of Yamaha's Beam driver tech. Connections include four HDMI inputs – but there's no Bluetooth here

★★★★★


Canton DM 50, £400

This sturdily built soundbase speaker may lack HDMI inputs but makes up for it with Bluetooth streaming and a full-bodied 2.1-channel performance. Movies and music benefit from clarity and power

★★★★★


Monitor Audio ASB-2, £1,000

This premium proposition marries Monitor Audio's C-CAM drivers with AirPlay and DLNA music streaming. Performance is exemplary – powerful and polished in equal measure

★★★★★


Philips HTL9100, £600

A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition. Easy to install and with a heavyweight sound

★★★★★


Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2, £1,650

This second-generation soundbar offers no separate subwoofer and is hardly cheap, but B&W's audio expertise shows through, and HDMI hookup aids installation

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS


Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★★


Samsung HT-F9750W, £1,500

Samsung's flagship tallboy array uses a vacuum tube pre-amp and offers unique DTS Neo: Fusion seven-channel processing. Powerful, fulsome sound; packed with features

★★★★★


Harman/Kardon BDS470, £650

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★


LG BH8220B, £650

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★


Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

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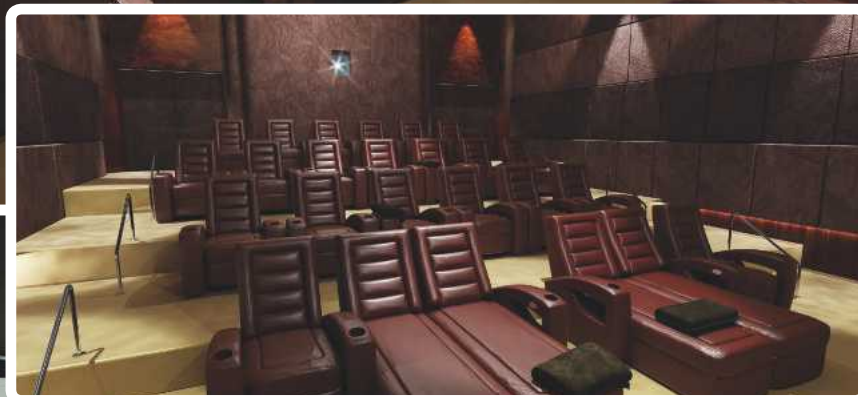
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POINT OF VIEW

In order to maintain domestic bliss, **Richard Stevenson** realises that having a blank canvas for a cinema room doesn't actually mean he can get exactly what he wants

WHAT IS THE perfect home cinema room? This is a question I have never lost much sleep over as the answer has generally been 'whichever room the missus will let me set up my kit in'. Yes, I'd love a 600sqft space kitted out to look like the bridge of the *NCC-1701A* (cos I'm *Trek*-retro like that) but to mix films and quote Austin Powers: 'And I want a solid gold toilet seat but it's not on the cards is it?'

However, plans for an extension to the Stevenson ranch have again been mooted in hushed tones at the local branch of Nat West. A slight relaxing of the banking industry purse strings has elevated the project marginally upwards from its previous status of *Mission Impossible*. It's a side extension, only really limited by finances.

So given such a blank canvas, how do you create the perfect home cinema room? PJ, screen and 11.2 audio goes without saying, but we are left with three key parameters; size, shape and style. Let's lump the first two together. Acoustically speaking, the shape of the room probably makes more difference to the sound than size. Get your wall lengths and ceiling heights wrong and you could end up with more nodes than a telephone exchange. Non-parallel walls are good too, but rooms with trapezoid shapes require an architect with a very open mind, or annexing off a lot of valuable space. Sloping ceilings are just weird and sloping floors are a health and safety hazard when mixed with red wine.

In fact, there are many theories and software calculators to prescribe the ideal wall length and ceiling height for the perfect audio room. They seem solid in theory but I have never heard one actually work in practice. I can cite three purpose-built AV demonstration rooms, all designed using such calculators, and they all suck. Often quite literally in the bass region.

You can avoid the obvious errors of making the walls precise multiples of the ceiling height and so on, but I am of the opinion that room dimensions and sound quality is largely a matter of blind luck. My junked-up, oddly dog-legged living room in my last house sounded fabulous, while I have seen manufacturers spend upwards of £70,000 crafting rooms that end up with all the acoustic charm of a head cold. So I have opted for the practical approach and gone for what looks about right on paper, roughly 6.5m x 9m and 2.5m tall. Besides, when we sell the house we are going to have to pretend it is just a giant living room anyway.

Keeping it sensible

And so to décor, furnishing and style. While I might have a hankering for chunky swivel chairs, red console-style coffee tables and a perimeter handrail to hang on to in times of Klingon attack, we are right back to that gold seat. It just isn't going to happen. Not if I want to stay married anyway. The best I can hope to get away with is some fancy lighting, DFS's finest on-sale sofas and maybe some electric blackout blinds. Doors that are made of timber to match the hallway are likely to get the thumbs up, metal ones that slide with a shushing noise won't.

Which all goes towards answering my initial question. For most people the ideal home cinema room is simply the one you can get all the kit into without upsetting the domestic apple-cart. It's usually the living room, decorated as a living room and usually the shape and size that the architect chose when the house was built. On the bright side, you can be pretty sure that the plans didn't involve a room acoustic dimension calculator ■

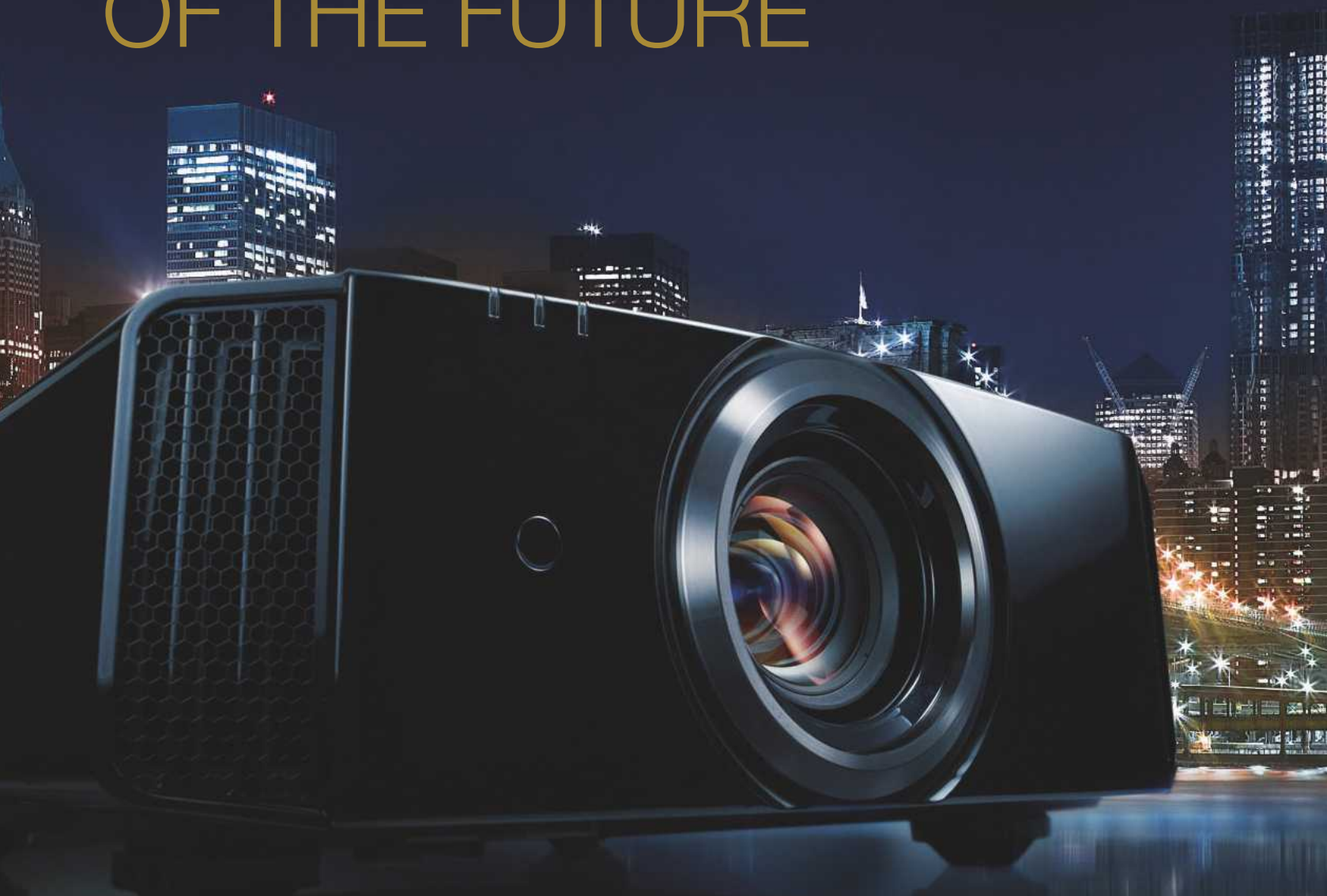
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Richard Stevenson's love of all things *Star Trek* means he's the only person in the UK to watch *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* more than once



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Lift your viewing experience to new heights with the latest 2014 range of 3D enabled D-ILA Projectors from JVC.* Featuring an industry leading native contrast ratio of 150,000:1 and a dynamic contrast ratio of 1,500,000:1.**

Not only is the range designed for ultra-high 4K resolution and is 60p ready. It also has the new JVC e-Shift 3 technology, this means it can shift sub-frames to achieve 4 times the pixel density of the original content, bringing you an even greater level of definition.

Now in it's sixth generation, our D-ILA Projectors have always set new standards. Capable of delivering images of advanced quality with extreme realism and presence in your home cinema environment.

But after all seeing is believing, so to arrange a product demonstration contact:

+44 (0)20 8450 3282 email: hdworld@jvc.co.uk
Or for more information visit: www.jvc.co.uk

DLA-X500R has been awarded:



4K
e-shift3

D-ILA

3D

* The 2014 range of JVC D-ILA Projectors consists of model numbers DLA-X900R, DLA-X700R, DLA-X500R. Visit www.jvc.co.uk for more details.

** Contrast ratio specifications are for the DLA-X900R.

Artcoustic™ Loudspeakers



Cinema design, re-defined

"If you're serious about home cinema at the premium level then these need to be on your shortlist"

"The soundstage created is both wide and deep, able to involve you unhesitatingly in the onscreen action"

"The Artcoustic system has a handy knack of revelling in quiet periods, painting a sonic picture, before bursting into life with shocking dynamism"

Home Cinema Choice, May 2014

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Spitfire 24-12 SL